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Mental Health Marathon

Presented by LifeSpeak Inc.

The following is the transcript of the May 5th, 2021 all day Ask the Expert web chat event with LifeSpeak experts. To find the session you are looking for in this transcript, please click on the icon below:

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Please note that this is a verbatim transcript, so all questions and answers appear exactly as they did during the event. We have not edited for typos or grammar.

Mental Health in the Workplace with Dr. Nicole Loreto

Welcome everyone! We are so pleased to have PhD, MSc, Dr. Nicole Loreto, with us today.

We will begin taking questions promptly at 8:30 AM ET. LifeSpeak will mediate this discussion and will allow or reject questions as they come in. Questions may be edited for length or for clarity. We will not accept questions that include personal attacks, unsubstantiated allegations, vulgar language or libelous statements.

Please note that Nicole's answers are purely informational and should in no way replace consultation with a professional. We will do our best to pose all allowable questions today.

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Good morning everyone! It is a pleasure for me to join you this morning during mental health week. Look forward to your questions!

Nicole

VEE: How can you encourage co-workers who are a) visibly struggling, and b) contributing to an unhealthy workplace.

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Hi Vee,

To answer the first part of your question, when you see a co-worker struggling, you can ask them how they are feeling? It is important not to assume about what they may appear to be struggling with. Depending on your relationship with the person, I would take a moment to check in with the person. In this online environment, it is difficult to have that conversation when you could normally see someone in the hallway or in the cafeteria. I would suggest calling the person and asking them how they feel and offer support. If the person doesn't want to share how they feel, then it is advisable to talk to your manager about your concern.

ANNABELLE: Hi, I am on the verge of burnout at work. My manager cannot reduce my workload or support me in other ways. I already see a doctor and psychologist (who diagnosed me). Can else can I do at work to help me cope with my mental fatigue, stress and volatile emotions (sadness, anger, etc.)?

DR. NICOLE LORETO: It is an important first step to recognize how you are feeling and how it impacts our thoughts and behaviors. If you are seeing a psychologist, explore what other tools that can help you cope with mental fatigue and stress such as cognitive behavior therapy that is very effective in managing our thoughts and emotions. Meditation is also effective.

I would also discuss with your doctor whether you can take some time off. With your psychologist, you could also discuss how to approach your manager about your mental health and your workload and see if there are any potential accommodations that can be explored until your mental health has improved.

CAD: How can I tell if someone may be struggling with mental health in a virtual work environment?

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Hi Cad,

Tough to assess in an online environment with most meetings all day. Depending on how well you know the person, if you start seeing changes in a person's behavior or mood. For instance, if they are generally upbeat and become very quiet during online meetings or appear frustrated or show no emotion (not caring about the discussion). Alternatively, the person may speak up more, be more aggressive in tone. Other common signs when someone is struggling is they share that they are having sleep issues (not sleeping, waking up early, in the middle of the night). Lack of sleep impacts mood and behavior.

SRB: Good morning! Do you have coping mechanisms for people who experience tears when their work is questioned or they receive criticism from their leaders? How do you fight back the demonstration of emotion?

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Hi SRB,

That is not a comfortable situation where you feel strong emotions when your work is questioned. It is important to explore what is making you feel that emotion.

I would suggest exploring cognitive behavior therapy: it helps us explore and reframe our thoughts to see if we can see this situation differently, assess why it makes you feel tearful, and helps you find strategies to manage

your emotions and deal calmly with the situation when your work is challenged. Working with a professional is also very effective at discussing these potential situations where you feel like your work is challenged and you will find some tools to help you address these issues without feeling like your respect or dignity is questioned.

DEB: How can we stay positive when our coworkers are constantly negative

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Hi Deb,

It's challenging to stay positive if coworkers are constantly negative. You don't need to figure out what explains their negativity, but it may be a reflection of what is happening in their life or what is happening at work. If you can limit your interaction with those that are negative and relate more with others that are more positive do that. If not, ask a positive question or share a positive story to help try and change the mood.

CAT: My life has changed dramatically since the beginning of the pandemic. I have happily adapted to working from home. I feel more stable, like I have more time and that I finally have a healthy work/life balance. But recently, I feel anxiety, almost fear, about suddenly being sent back to my office. Like one day, we'll receive a message that we're back full time. My boss can't wait to go back and mentions it regularly. How can I address this anxiety? And is this something that organizations should be considering?

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Hi Cat,

This pandemic has affected everyone. You are not alone. Health anxiety is real and it is normal to feel anxious about how life and work will unfold after the pandemic. Like you, I have colleagues that can't wait to get back to the office and work while others experience a higher level of stress just thinking about returning to the office. I would suggest exploring cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) online or with a professional. It is very effective at helping us deal with fear, the underlying emotion of anxiety. You can also find the right time for you to discuss your feeling with your manager. Many organizations are exploring hybrid work models on how best to have employees and teams return to the office. Ask your manager what options is the organization exploring.

DA: Given the current state of the world and with working from home for many likely to continue for some time to come, I find it a struggle at times separating work life (i.e. answering emails late into the evening) from family life and the stress build up impacts both areas. What are some strategies to help balance work life-home life so that stress does not build up and negatively impact interactions with coworkers?

DR. NICOLE LORETO: The lines in our work/life have been blurred by the pandemic. It is normal to feel the struggle of being "on" all the time. I would suggest that you first delineate your work environment and set office hours as you would do at the office. Schedule in your breaks, the times you can go for a quick walk, yoga class, meditation. I schedule these activities that I need for my mental health as important because if not, the work takes over all day and all night.

Chat with your colleagues about how you are feeling. Chances are they are feeling the same way and discuss ways to manage the demands of work and the timeframe to answer emails or schedule meetings. Your mental health is important and when you set the limits of your work day, you can find balance and do the things you like. Remember, there will always be dozens of emails that if they aren't urgent, can be dealt with the next day.

Q: Working alone in a repetitive environment. When you are alone with your thoughts, how can I keep from spiraling and create a better headspace? Especially when doing repetitive tasks which may feel like you are reliving the same day over and over which is daunting.

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Hi Q,

You are not alone in feeling this way and it is very easy to start spiraling. If you have a negative thought ("oh my day is so boring"), it turns into a negative emotion like frustration and an emotion brings a negative behavior (lethargy). So important to tell your mind to stay positive and to zap any negative feeling that creeps up. Meditation helps to separate the emotion from our thoughts. In mindfulness, it is called getting the monkey off our back.

With respect to the repetitive tasks, ask to join a committee or start an initiative that can break the routine of your day and the contributions that you can make to

your team or organization. If not, try volunteering. Having a sense of purpose can transform the time you can give someone or an organization and you will appreciate the repetitive tasks of your work so that you can use all your extra energy in something meaningful. I would also suggest scheduling some mini-me moments in the day (quick walk around the block), exercise, chatting with friends so that it can break up the monotony of your day.

JILL A.: There's still a huge stigma in the workplace particularly with Mental health...people with anxiety issues are not supported, which enhances the anxiety issues they experience. When you do confide in your co-workers the expression on their faces says it all. How can this be changed.

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Hi Jill,

I think we are beginning to address stigma in the workplace but there is much more that needs to happen. Public education campaigns like Not Myself Today are helping break the stigma and misunderstanding. If you have shared how you feel with some co-workers and they have not been supportive that is tough. It could mean many things so it is important not to negatively interpret their behavior. I have seen that many people are uncomfortable when someone shares their struggle and often they don't know what to say or do or that they are feeling overwhelmed in their own lives that they do nothing and appear totally unsupportive.

It is important to surround yourself with people that you feel safe and comfortable with to share how you feel in a safe environment. Anxiety is not always understood and I like to encourage people to find the tools that can help them manage their anxiety and the emotions associated. I really like cognitive behavior therapy and meditation that can calm the mind and body and help you face the daily challenges and the anxiety you can experience at work. I have found often that people around you become more supportive.

MARIA: With respect to work-life balance, one of the video mentions things like flexible work hours, but when you're a parent, especially during covid times, all that ends up happening is taking longer breaks to deal with stressful periods at home with the kids (and trying to manage their emotional well being), but then working 12-16 hour days and not truly feeling that you that you

took a break, which leads to more stress and feeling overwhelmed. How do you manage that? My manager has been incredibly accommodating, but I don't feel any less anxious, panicky, and feeling like I'm failing at both home and work duties. How do you get that balance so that you are able to control your stress in both while meeting demands for both?

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Being a parent and working during covid times is very tough and it is causing much stress as you also take care of your family. The fact that you are recognizing the impact is important.

Depending on the ages of your children, talk it over as a family. Sharing feelings is important because children will sense it regardless of what you say or don't. Brainstorm how you can all best support each other during this pandemic. Adopt some superheroes in your family to help deal with the challenges we face. It starts from a position of strength which is important. You will be surprised at how fun children can have using these superhero ideas to help them deal with their struggles during this time.

It is important to delineate lines between your work and your home life. In the past, going to work delineated those lines so, in this online environment, we have to structure our work and our life and times with family and friends. Schedule breaks together for walks in the park or around the block. Fresh air (even rain) is good for the mind and body.

As a caregiver, create some me-time in your day, even if it is 5 min for an audio meditation where you can close your eyes, take 5 deep long breaks. Do a 5 -10 exercise segment watching your favorite TV, or read a book, a moment that is for you. These me-moments need to be scheduled in your workday because they won't happen if you don't. I also encourage online cognitive behavior therapy which helps us build the tools we need to deal with the daily challenges and build resiliency as individuals but also as families.

KIM: I'm an essential worker and can't work from home. I have a lot of anxiety about coming into the workplace and am worried about taking the vaccine. What can I do?

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Hi Kim,

If you are feeling anxious about returning to the workplace, I would suggest learning more about what is causing the anxiety. The underlying emotion of anxiety is fear and this pandemic has elevated everyone's definition of fear. If you are worried about taking the vaccine, I would encourage you to learn more about the various types of vaccine through reliable sources such as the National Institute of Health depending on where you live and through your place of work.

As you are an essential worker, discuss with the person in occupational health that can give you information on what is required for your time at work. If your anxiety persists, get in touch with a professional who they can offer some counseling to help relieve your anxiety.

RMP: Workload has doubled in my unit because of Covid-19. My team is slowly growing. I can see some of my employees struggling, as am I. How can I support them and myself during this transition?

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Hi RMP, good for you to recognize how you and your employees are feeling because of Covid.

It is hard on everyone and acknowledging that with your unit is valuable. Employees will appreciate that everyone is affected and that is not them. I often get "Is it just me?" and discussing it as a team can help brainstorm strategies that can work for your unit in terms of supporting each other.

As the leader of your unit, take some time to take care of your mental health. It is like the plane analogy, you have to put the mask on first before helping others.

Explore your company's wellbeing services that you can use. If you have employees struggling, tell them about the resources available to them. If there are none, I would suggest contacting a medical professional that could offer some assistance. There is also cognitive behavior therapy that is offered online or in-person depending on where you live.

DR. NICOLE LORETO: Thank you for your questions. Taking care of your mental health is a key aspect of your help. Explore coping strategies that will help you manage work and life challenges.

Best, Nicole

LIFESPEAK: *Thank you, Nicole, for sharing your time with us today. We are sorry that we did not have time to take all of the excellent questions that came in. Thanks to all of you for participating!*

Please join us at 11 AM ET for our next webchat, Children's Mental Health with Dr. Deanne Simms and Alyson Schafer!

Children's Mental Health with Dr. Deanne Simms and Alyson Schafer

Welcome everyone! We are so pleased to have Children's mental health experts, Dr. Deanne Simms and Alyson Schafer, with us today.

We will begin taking questions promptly at 11:00 AM ET. LifeSpeak will mediate this discussion and will allow or reject questions as they come in. Questions may be edited for length or for clarity. We will not accept questions that include personal attacks, unsubstantiated allegations, vulgar language or libelous statements.

Please note that Dr. Deanne Simms and Alyson Schafer's answers are purely informational and should in no way replace consultation with a professional. We will do our best to pose all allowable questions today.

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hello everyone,

My name is Dr. Simms and I'm looking forward to answering your questions today.

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Hi there! I am looking forward to our discussion today!

NORMAN: My partner and I are getting divorced. Our two children have gotten used to all of us being together all the time since the beginning of the pandemic and it's really hard for them to not have both parents together anymore. Is there anything more we can do to help them get through this?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Children are resilient. If you keep a positive attitude about their ability to cope with the new living arrangements the more likely and quickly they will adapt to it, too. Make sure both homes feel "homey" with their personal possessions etc. Be very kind and warm to one another when you drop the kids off at each others homes. Make that first day back after being away especially focused on connecting and being together again. My children stayed in touch daily with their dad by playing online games together so the connection was ongoing. It's hard for kids to "talk" and give updates everyday to a parent, but playing together is just as connecting. Snapchat is also good for being silly and staying in touch.

ROBIN: My 14 year old daughter is not a very social kid. She likes a lot of activities that don't require to be with over people and I'm afraid she's staying away from kids her age because there's something wrong. She tells me know everything is fine but I still worry, is there anything more I can do?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: From what you have shared, I am not sure there is anything really to worry about. The important factor is if she feels a sense of connection and belonging

with other people, and that she has social skills. It sounds like she does. She may be very discriminating in her taste for friends and prefer people that match her maturity. If she is an eldest or only child and has become accustomed to socializing with parents and teachers, peers and their issues can seem like more drama than its worth. Some people are more introverted by nature and that is okay! The book "Quiet" by Susan Cain explains how we are so biased towards extroverts and pathologize introverts. Teen girl culture is often petty and toxic and many don't feel they want to participate in that (which is good!). By college and university there seems to be a better pool of people and a willingness for more diversity in friend groups. If she complains she is lonely - that is another issue!!! But for now - no worries! :)

JAMIE: I used to be close to my son (he's 15 now) but since last year, I find it difficult to talk to him. He spends a lot of time online playing games with strangers, and I don't approve but he gets angry when I take his computer away. I don't know what to do for him to live in the real world. Any advice?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: You are not alone! Many 15 year olds are isolating in their rooms on games. The important part of staying close is to take an interest in him, and see if he will let you learn about his game. Maybe even play it with you. There is a lot to talk about strategy, opponents. But also find offline interests that he enjoys and join him. YOU have to go into his world instead of assuming he will do things you are interested in. No matter what - keep trying. He will notice your efforts.

KF: At what point does cutting off toxic friends become a negative and further impede mental health. Socializing with friends is so important, but some of these friends are toxic and contributing to the negative feelings and feeding the anxiety.

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi KF,

An important part of life's journey for kids and teens is to learn about who they are as individuals, and how to make and keep healthy relationships.

It can be important from an early age to have discussions with young people about what makes relationships healthy; how they feel after they are interacting with their friends, what they do and don't like about how others are treating them.

It can then be helpful to have trusted adults model and help them shape conversations or communications with their friends and peers where they share what they do and don't like within their friendships.

Part of life is learning to make decisions about relationships, and learning how to keep, enhance, or also, at times, end relationships in a healthy way that maintains their own and other's respect and dignity.

TOOT: Hello, My 11 year old daughter is suffering from misophonia (hatred of sounds). We are at a stage that we are afraid to cough and make noises at home. This is extremely hard on both my daughter and on the entire family. Some people said it may be a shape of Panda\PAN. Anything you can to help will be appreciated.

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi Toot,

Thank you for your note. So sorry to hear that your kiddo and your family are struggling through this. Kids and teens that I've worked with who suffer from Misophonia usually have a tough time navigating what is a difficult experience and complex situation. I would strongly recommend a thorough assessment by your general practitioner, pediatrician, or mental health specialist; treatment for misophonia needs to be based within the context of a thorough assessment to ensure that your daughter is able to receive the right treatment from the right provider in a way that is most helpful to her and to your family.

I hope after assessment you are able to get her the treatment she needs to help put you all on track to live a more comfortable life. Help is out there and large gains can be made in the lives of people experiencing Misophonia.

MALKIE: I have a toddler who seems to be struggling with aggression. How do you navigate that at such a young age

where you can't actually reason with them?

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi Malkie,

Yes. Toddler years can be difficult to navigate simply because, as you stated, their little brains aren't developed enough that you can reason with them or have them understand their own feelings and behaviors.

Kiddos at their core want attention from their caregivers. Attention is a very powerful reward. Try as much as possible to "catch them being good" and reward their good behavior with smiles, hi-5's and cuddles. Then, when you notice they are struggling, try to decrease your attention slightly and ignore any behaviors that are not going to hurt them or others, or make people or places unsafe.

Depending on their age, you can try to set out limits using repeated phrases like "we keep our hands to ourselves" and try to have consistent ways of responding to their actions (e.g., if you throw a toy, it gets put away for 5 minutes or until you can calm down and keep yourself and others safe).

EILI: How can we foster a body positivity when the kid is physically smaller than the average especially when entering a new High school?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Modeling body positivity yourself is key. Also, discuss "youth culture" and how it pushes unrealistic body image on teens so that it is a discussion where she feels she has an upper hand knowledge on how this is manipulated on social media and movies, etc. Take extra time to amplify the qualities that really matter, i.e. people's character!!

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Thanks for the question, Eili.

Certainly, a common concern for parents while preteens and teens navigate transitions like from elementary to middle or from middle to high school. Teenagers are learning about themselves as individuals outside of their family, and are trying to make sense of the world around them. Deeply important in this process, is trying to successfully navigate their social world -- fitting in with their peers. One of the ways that kids are trying to fit in is in terms of their appearance; at a time when fitting in is so important, it can be even more frustrating when you perceive a difference in your body weight, shape, or size in comparison to your peers.

One of the important things we are trying to build within the youth we love is body positivity; positive thoughts and appraisals of their bodies, no matter what form or shape they take. This is important because we know that this is tied to general health and well-being. Try to encourage your teen to take stock of the strengths or advantages of living in a smaller frame, be mindful of the ways in which you label your own and their body, explain the effects of puberty, and encourage them to have discussions with their care provider of the general health status of their body. Try to encourage balance and strength-based views and comments on bodies in general, and about theirs specifically. Finally, acknowledge they will likely experience emotions as they transition into school, and encourage them to talk to you about them when they pop up.

JOLLY: My daughter who is 8, has been online learning for a year. I found she starts to watch youtube during the class time. I asked her to share office with me. But she would find ways to escape my monitoring. It is stressful to go after her. She is stressful too. But it is so hard for this age kids to resist the attraction of games, youtube and other multi-media attraction. What is your suggestion in this situation?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Online learning has been a challenge, hasn't it? I feel your pain. You have done a good job setting the expectations for her, doing your best to monitor, but also refusing to fight about it. I would speak to the teacher about your challenges. Sometimes they can try to be more engaging or to find cues about when to TUNE IN again when new content is being taught etc. But ultimately, your 8-year-old needs to take responsibility for their learning and understand that if you don't pay attention, if you play instead of focus, you'll not learn as much. Your marks will go down. I have heard that overall marks are down for everyone so it's just part of the pandemic mark on our culture. Some kids can't do online at all - so give her credit for paying even SOME attention. See if the teacher can help you by assuring she doesn't fall way behind by letting you know which of the concepts she needs to have a handle on and make sure that she is keeping up on that part of the curriculum.

SERENA: Hello, thank you for this opportunity. I would like to ask you about pre teens and social media. In this period of pandemic, using Snapchat and House Party has become almost a need, to maintain their sociality needs.

Any tips how to maintain balance and control?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Yes, agreed! They are so fortunate to have tech to keep the friendships and connections going. But yes, balance is also super important if we are to ensure good mental health outcomes during the pandemic. Teens don't like to feel parental control, so instead, we need to rely on the power of influence. Have a conversation about what a balanced day would look like to them. It should include things like a good night's sleep, exercise in the fresh air, socializing IRL (not just online), school work, hobbies, family time, chores, etc... And ask them how they plan to schedule or create a daily routine for themselves that has all those good mental health elements. Imposing routines will likely invite a protest, but being curious and asking the right questions can lead them down a decision tree that has tech being used proportionally to the other elements of a day.

KK: How do we continue to maintain a positive and trusting relationship with our children as they become teenagers?

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Thanks for this great question, KK. The fact that you are asking it lets me know that you are caring and interested in continuing to build on the relationship that you have fostered with your children. Those are great starting blocks to the kind of future relationship it sounds like you want with your kiddos!

While kids develop into teenagers, their brains and bodies are working to understand who they are as individuals, and how they can and will continue to navigate the world around them. This can be a scary and difficult time especially as they notice and become aware of many changes in their bodies and minds.

The best way to maintain a positive and trusting relationship is to provide a soft landing place for your teens to return to while they are stepping out into the world around them. This means being respectful of their autonomy and privacy, inquiring actively about their thoughts and feelings, trying to be non-judgmental when they share their struggles with you, and validating their emotions "I can see that you seem upset after that text you got from Sara. It makes good sense that you feel that way because she is your good friend and her words were hurtful." Then being open to problem-solving if and when your teens invite you to do so; sometimes it is helpful to

coach them through figuring things out themselves, then having the door open to support them more at times when they need more help.

The basic ingredients of positive trusting relationships are just what you mention: positive regard for your kiddo, trust that they'll come to you when they need your help, and loving, empathic responses when they share their thoughts and feelings.

BENJI: My 8 year old daughter has recently developed germaphobia which is impacting her ability to live normally, since she is always having to wash her hands or use hand sanitizer. Is there a good way to deal with this?

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi Benji,

Thanks for your question. Sorry to hear your kiddo is struggling with fear of germs. This is certainly something that I've seen and heard more of in my practice and in my personal life over the past year.

I think one point to be made is that it makes sense that your little one has become overly focused on germs; with the focus on COVID-19 and repeated messaging coming from parents, teachers, peers, and the media, it is totally normal that she is trying to make sense of these pieces of information and apply them to her own life.

While it is normal for kids to have increased their attention to this sphere of life, I think that it is important to distinguish what is "normal or typical" in these abnormal times, and what is starting to get in the way for your kiddo.

We always try to keep an eye on when behavior changes are limiting our kid's functioning in a certain area of life (e.g., can't focus on schoolwork, no longer able to talk to friends or family), or when they are causing them distress (e.g., getting frustrated with themselves for washing their hands but not being able to stop despite this frustration). While I don't have all of the details of your situation, if you notice that she is very preoccupied with washing her hands and using sanitizer outside of times when it is appropriate/warranted, if she is distressed about her hand washing/cleaning but seems unable to decrease or interrupt it, or if the handwashing has started to get in the way of her living life (pandemic life) as she typically would, then I would not hesitate to reach out to your GP or pediatrician so that they can get more of a sense of

her struggle and what would be best to help her. I would also be mindful of media/news exposure in the home; we are all inundated with very evocative content (bright red flashing images, emotional music) daily about the virus. Kids are not immune to these messages and we should try to limit their exposure - especially if they seem overly worried about it.

In addition to the above, it could also be helpful to speak to her about her fears or worries that are tied to her handwashing. Getting her to clue into her fear can be the first step in helping her to learn other ways to manage her worry. Practicing belly breathing, or distracting herself through other pleasurable activities (especially with bodily movement) may be helpful to her in times when she is worried.

CHRIS B: I have three sons and my second son compares himself to his older brother all the time. I'm afraid he's developing a limiting belief that he's not as smart or capable as his older brother. I point out that everyone has their own unique talents and personality, but I don't want him to pigeonhole himself as "not the smart one".

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi Chris,

Thanks for your question.

It certainly is normal for kids to compare themselves to others - particularly to important others who they are close to in age and proximity. So it makes sense that your middle son is comparing himself to his older brother. I'm not sure of the ages of your sons, but one thing that may be difficult for your middle son to do is to compare himself to his brother at an appropriate age and stage; younger siblings always use their brothers and sisters in the present as a comparator instead of who they were when they were at the same age and stage. It can be helpful to show pictures of siblings at similar ages and stages so they have more accurate feedback in an "apples to apples" way.

The deeper content in your note, though certainly resonates; you don't want your middle child to discount his own skills and strengths in the context of who his siblings are or aren't. It may be helpful to spend some time with your son (alone and also later on as a family or just with the older son) to highlight and amplify his unique and similar talents. It is important that he understand the contribution of both unique and similar talents combine to

make him who he is (e.g., I'm the best at baseball, and I'm as good at Math as Sam was when he was my age). Again, depending on his age/stage, it may be helpful for him to map out on a pie chart all of the different areas of life that make him who he is. That context may help him to realize that he is more than one "category" and that regardless of how he matches up to his brother (when he was at his age/stage) he is unique, talented, and valued.

PLANT LADY: I have a 15, 11 and 9 year old. They are my step-children who will be spending all summer with us. This is the first time we'll have had them for this long. When we have them for the weekend / week. It can be very stressful as they view being at Dad's place as a fun, relaxing situation. I'm anxious as I'd like there to be some structure to the summer with chores, reading time, physical activity time and a little bit of electronics. There is so much resistance for the above during the short time they are here.. how can I communicate effectively to my kids that the summer schedule and routine will NOT include endless hours of electronics? Thanks.

ALYSON SCHAFFER: I love your goal for a more structured routine for the family during the summer. I would suggest starting something called family meetings to help you achieve the family balance you are envisioning. When we invite children to discussions, they are more likely to feel heard, understood, valued and thus they co-operate with us better. You can't unilaterally decide how the family will operate or else you'll get rebellion and protest. So having weekly family meetings will help you do your planning and deciding together. There are lots of online articles and youtube videos about how to hold these, but briefly...they should be short and sweet. Attendance is voluntary, but who ever shows up gets to help make the house rules. Have a chair person and secretary. Rotate these jobs. Team up with a parent to train a child how to do these roles. Have a short agenda that includes items the kids want to discuss. Don't vote - use consensus. The rules/agreements will be tried for one week and then at the next family meeting, you can review and see if they need to be tweaked or a new plan needs to be tried. If you stick with these weekly for the entire summer - you can work through ANY challenges - including laying out daily routines and weekly schedule. Also, family meetings are a great time to talk about chores, allowance, planning family outings, etc.

LI: My 4 year old yells at my partner a lot. I find myself intervening most times because I think his tone is not being assertive. Is this the wrong approach?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: I can understand how you would want to step in, but the best practice here is to encourage your partner to manage the discipline themselves. If you step in, it creates a perception that your partner is not capable. It creates a hierarchy that puts you on top as having more power / more say. Some ideas that might be helpful are to have your partner say "I will not stand in the face of disrespect" and simply walk away when the child is being rude to them. Also, you can keep a small notebook and write down situations that are causing conflict between your partner and the child, and during a time of calm, review together how you both agree the situation should be handled so you go into the next encounter already prepared with a more effective response to the child's misbehavior.

JESS: We've been alienated from our kids. They don't sleep at their normal time. They sneak out in the middle of the night, we don't know where they're going and what they're doing. Their night is our day, and we don't get to see them or speak with them like we did before the pandemic. It's as if they're avoiding their parents. There is no dialogue any more. It's in and out of the house at odd hours. What can we do to re-establish the relationship and make sure we can avoid the worse? Thank you.

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Hey Jess. I am sorry you are struggling with this. I hope it is of comfort to know that the teens in captivity have been very creative in finding their privacy, which is developmentally appropriate in adolescence. Instead of hanging out at the mall or school, they have claimed the night hours when the parents are sleeping. So, while it is common - it doesn't mean that it is okay. We need to work to keep the relationship strong with our teens during this time of transition when their peer group is so important to them. Connecting with our teens is about getting to know them - the real them. Teens often say "my parents don't know me" even though they have meals together every night. So try taking them out for coffee and a walk and treat them like you would someone else's kid. Don't interrogate, or be instructional. Just get to know them! Find something they like to do with you, even if you hate it. And if you can't rebuild the relationship on your own - find a family therapist to

help assist you. Strong family bonds are a very important protective factor in teen mental health.

TWINLOCKDOWNLIFE: Hello, My 7 year old twin boys used to be in separate classrooms when school was inperson learning. Now with online learning, they are constantly together and are at each other constantly. Other than trying to separate them on weekends, any strategies to help them find their personal space and identity?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: You are wise to understand that twins do indeed need to find their own space and niche in the family. They don't want to be compared to one another and they each must find their own unique strengths and talents. Be on the lookout for where each shines and play those up in the family.

Also - and this is key to kids who compete - when they are in conflict, see the conflict as a collaborative effort. It takes TWO to fight, so they are agreeing to bug each other. Why? Usually, kids who fight do so in order to get a parent involved. Basically, well-behaved children get ignored and kids who kerfuffle get attention. So change that up - only give them attention when they are getting along. And when they do fight - and you do have to step in - make sure that BOTH get the same consequence. If they are fighting over the iPad, for example, then they BOTH lose iPad privileges. This assures that you are not perceived as taking someone's side or painting one sibling as the aggressor and the other as the victim which pits them for more competition or a more antagonistic relationship.

MOM: I'm a divorced single mother and my son prefers to now live with his dad and girlfriend. The advice I received from a therapist was from age 12-17 they're loyal to their dad and they'll see the light at the age of 17 or 18. I continually say 'I love you and you're always welcome home.' I text daily with jokes, visiting ideas, I write him letters occassionally and we meet up for bike rides etc.. I understand divorce would be one of the most difficult things to go through as a child but I strongly believe children need both parents in their lives. Is there any advice on additional avenues to continue a relationship with my teenage son, or is persistence and patience really the only way to go?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: It sounds like you are doing a wonderful job of maintaining the relationship. The key is

to listen and learn from the teens about how they would like to see things go. Teens often talk and we don't "hear" what they are saying, and as a therapist, I am often the one to deliver a message a teen has been saying for years! I would suggest asking him what he would like in order to improve and strengthen the relationship with you. It is common in my experience that teens don't want to be judged, micromanaged, pressured to be something they are not. They really want acceptance and some space to grow into themselves. They need parents who are modeling happiness by living their own fulfilled life. After a divorce (I am too, by the way) people have time to take stock and re-define their own lives and you have a great opportunity to put energy into deciding what this next phase of life will look like for you! Show your teen how to "create a life of one's own making" because that is what they are busy doing developmentally now too. I hope this is helpful.

JOHN: My 12 year daughter (with borderline ADHD) had become increasingly addicted to internet. Looking for approaches to reduce screen time. Trying to get her outside but have been met with resistance and aggression and yelling. Any advice?

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi John,

Thanks for your note. Sounds like it has been a struggle of late to navigate the tech use with your 12 year old. I hear this a lot from parents lately while kids are at home for more time than they historically might have been, and while some of them are engaging in remote-learning via technology. It can be a difficult balance to strike.

At 12, kiddos are starting the process of learning about themselves as individuals, learning where and how they fit in with their peers, and learning how to navigate the world around them. The reality is that for kids and teens today in many environments/geographies much of this work is taking place through technology (phone, email, social media, internet). This contact (which I'm presuming is making up at least some of your daughter's online time) is very important in allowing our youth to develop their identity (including their values, beliefs and sense of self).

Nevertheless, I see in your note you mention that she has become "addicted" to the internet and we are aware that excessive technology use can interfere with school, sleep, and mental well-being.

So, what to do? How to strike a balance?

Well, we know that youth and teens actually want the adults in their lives to talk to them about technology use, and want help navigating some of the situations or emotions that can come up in the context of using the internet or social media. We know that rather than imposing restrictions on technology use engaging in collaborative discussions and limit-setting can help increase youth engagement in rules about technology and can actually help them to learn to self-manage their technology use over time. So, this can look like coming up with boundaries such as no screen time 30-60 mins before bed, keeping phones outside of bedrooms, and checking in about experiences that cause strong emotions. The more your kiddos work to demonstrate that they are responsible and are working within the limits set, then you can reward them for their behavior with increased autonomy. Finally, it is important that adults model healthy boundaries with technology also; rules like no phones at the tables should apply to all family members (as difficult as it may be, at times!)

D: What are the signs to look for in children to know if they have been bullied at school?

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi D,

Thanks for your question.

Bullying is aggressive, intentional behavior that can be physical, verbal, or relational and usually involves a power imbalance. Bullying can take place in person, or via technology, and can result in feelings of sadness, anxiety, helplessness and, over time, can start to chip away at self-esteem. For all of these reasons, bullying can get in the way of functioning at school, at home with friends and family, and in engaging in pleasurable activities.

Signs that parents can be on the lookout for include, resistance to going to school (or the setting where the bullying may be happening), changes to eating or sleeping, tearfulness, social withdrawal, physical complaints like headaches and stomach aches, and negative-self statements (that is a change from how your kiddo traditionally may have spoken about themselves - (e.g., going from "I got this!" to "I can never do anything right, I'm such a loser").

If you notice the above, or any lasting changes to the

way your kiddos seem to be acting, or talking about themselves, spend some quiet time alone, and have an open, judgment-free discussion about how they are doing. If your kiddo resists at first, let them know that the door is open to talking at any point. Also, if the changes noted above are lasting and they still don't take you up on your offer to talk, reach out to their family doctor, pediatrician, or a mental health practitioner to provide them with a safe space to talk.

JJ: My ex keeps telling my children we are getting back together and he tells them to ask me to forgive him. The kids beg me to take him back. I do not want to have adult conversations with them but how can I keep them from thinking I am the bad guy not wanting to be with their father. without telling them all the details of why we are not together anymore?

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi JJ,

Sounds like you and your kiddos are really struggling to navigate the separation from your ex. These situations are always difficult and are made even more complex by the strong emotions that naturally arise during the end of relationships.

In these situations, kids can feel confused, hurt, worried, and they can blame themselves as they try to make sense of the situation (in the absence of information, many of the kiddos and later adults that I work with confuse little things they did with the reasons their parents separated).

The most important thing for you to do in this situation is to speak to your children in a way that lets them know that, while your relationship with your ex has ended, you will always love them and that, although your family will look different, you will all continue to respect each other. You can let them know that, even though you and your ex are no longer in a relationship, you will both continue to do your best to keep your kiddos healthy, happy, and safe - even if you are doing it apart from different homes.

In addition, it sounds like it may be helpful for you to continue processing adult content (emotions, structure of family interactions and routines, disclosures to kids) with your ex. It would be ideal if you could come to an agreement with what (developmentally appropriate) information would be shared with your kiddos. You could then plan where you could talk to them together, and

you could then share with them presenting a united front and using as much “we” language as possible, the reasons that you ended your relationship. It is not important to provide specific details, but you can let them know things like you tried to fix your relationship but you both thought you could be healthier and happier living apart, or you like each other as friends and you respect each other but don’t want to be married as a romantic couple any longer. Finally, it is best for the wellness of your kiddos that you communicate directly to your ex, rather than your kiddos delivering communications between their parents. This can lead to confusion, hurt, and is to be avoided, if possible.

In your communications to the kids directly, it is best to remain neutral and stay away from blaming (either self, or your partner), but rather to normalize that the shape and structures of families may change over time, but that your family will always be connected through love and respect.

You can also share with your kids what parts of their life will change (when they are with you, when they are with your ex), and what things will stay the same (you’ll still love them, they’ll still go to the same school), etc.

On the whole, it is important to remember that your communications with your kiddos will continue over the days, weeks, and months ahead. The best foundation is being open to discussions with them where they are able to share their thoughts, worries, and emotions, and where their emotions are met with non-judgmental acceptance. Separations are hard on every person in the family and dynamics take some time to sort out, especially at the beginning. If you are worried about how your kids are coping or making sense of the separation, don’t hesitate to reach out to your care providers or mental health specialists to allow them neutral safe spaces to discuss their feelings.

A: My 7yo & I are about to meet his paternal half brother, he is very excited but I know there is going to be a mixture of emotions that come along with the excitement. How can I help him manage those feelings?

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi A,

Thank you for your question. Families are very interesting concepts, aren’t they? Families take all different shapes, sizes, structures, and they are filled with many complex

relationships that evolve and change over time.

That said, kids are wonderfully resilient creatures. I am excited that he is excited to meet his half-brother! As you note, I’m sure there are many emotions that may arise for him before, during, and after he meets his half-brother, especially if the relationship they forge is one that continues over time. In advance of the meeting, it may be helpful to spend some quiet time alone with your son, providing space for him to talk to you about his thoughts and feelings about his half-brother. What is he most excited about? How does he feel in his body when he thinks of meeting him? What does he think will go well? What does he think may feel funny or awkward?

It is important that he know that people may feel all kinds of emotions (like happy, sad, scared) and feel all kinds of things in their bodies (butterflies in their tummy, fidgety with their hands) when they meet new people, especially other important people. You can share with him that whatever comes up for him before, during, and after his meeting, is totally normal, and that when he feels like sharing those things with you, you’ll be excited to hear all about them and you’ll help him to make sense of them.

The one other thing I’ll note is that this is an important meeting for you, too! Try to be mindful of your own thoughts and emotions before, during, and after the meeting. Try to notice them in a non-judgmental way, and, if necessary, discuss them with a trusted other like a friend, family member, or your partner. It can be helpful for you to process your emotions so that you are able to stay calm and grounded while you are supporting your son through meeting his half-brother.

I hope the meeting is positive and that it forms the foundation of a long and healthy relationship within your family!

GM: What is the best way to discuss gender identity or sexual orientation with a younger child (pre-teen)?

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi GM,

Thank you for this great question.

Pre-teen kids are starting to think more about who they are in relation to others around them; they compare themselves to family members, peers, older teens and

other people in the media to get a sense of how they are alike, and how they are different from others. Gender identity and sexual orientation are part of these early thoughts that start to form the basis of a sense of self, over time.

The most important thing you can do in your discussions with your pre-teens is to have supportive, open and non-judgmental conversations with them.

You can acknowledge that kids at their age are learning all about their bodies, and their brains, as well as who they are attracted to, and what feels good to them.

You can acknowledge that everyone goes on their own journey to make sense of who they are, who they are attracted to, who they form relationships with, and who they do or do not engage in sexual activities with.

The most important thing for them to know is that it is normal that this process may take time, and that you are there to support them and to talk to them openly whenever they need you, along their journey. Try to use their words when they express themselves, and respect their wishes about when, where and to whom they want to have discussions with on the topic of their gender or sexuality.

You can also let them know that you are available for discussions with them on the topic over time. Think less about “the talk” and more about an ongoing conversation that shifts and changes over time, where you provide a safe space to talk, acknowledge feelings, and answer questions to the best of your ability. It is also ok to say when you don’t have an answer or an opinion, and do some research on your own, or with your kiddo.

Finally, try to be mindful of your words and your actions in this space; try not to make hurtful, harmful, negative or disparaging comments about sexuality, gender, or orientation in general, and especially in front of or towards your kiddos.

LISY: My son has learning disabilities that really impact him at school. He is 11 and starting to notice that he is different than the other kids when learning. He is starting to become embarrassed at his disabilities. How do I support him through this?

DR. DEANNE SIMMS: Hi Lisy,

Thank you for your note. As a child psychologist, I have a deep appreciation for the fascinating ways in which kids’ brains work. This forms the basis through which I conduct and relay findings of the psychoeducational assessments I do where I learn about the unique ways kids think, process information, learn, remember, and communicate about all of the fascinating things going on in their little heads!

I also have an awareness of the ways in which our unique strengths and challenges can impact the way we feel about ourselves, and the way we feel in relation to our peers (especially when there are diagnostic labels applied to our thinking and learning). I have an even greater appreciation of how this impact may be more deeply felt for kids in their pre-teen and teenage years when they are really just starting to learn more about themselves as individuals and where they fit in amongst their peers.

One of the ways in which I speak to kiddos about their brain functioning is that each and every brain is different; the tests that we use give us oodles of information about so many different facets of thinking and learning. But they are limited in that they really give us information that is most helpful when applied to school, educational, or learning environments and not other settings or contexts of life. Further, if everyone in the world had access to our testing, we would find all kinds of strengths and challenges that people have -- people you wouldn’t expect like famous actors and actresses, political figures, inventors, etc. may all have thinking profiles similar to your son’s -- we just haven’t held a microscope to them to get all that information.

It is important for your son also to take stock of all of the other areas of life where he has strengths and skills; the parts that make him who he is. A pie chart, or a physical representation (like the outline of a body drawn on a page, where he is able to draw or cut out pictures to glue into the shape) that help him to remember all of the parts that make him who his. The things that bring him pleasure, the things that he can do that others can’t, and the settings outside of school where he feels capable, powerful, or skilled. Hopefully these will help to build and sustain his confidence when he finds himself frustrated in the classroom.

PATRICIA: My 6.5 year old has always been a little more temperamental and quick to react. But over the last year, it has increased significantly with outbursts almost daily when she doesn't get what she wants. She hits, screams, and is in a rage. We try to anticipate and get her to try breathing to calm down but sometimes it's like flipping a switch and we can't calm her before it gets out of control. How can we help her manage her emotions or find a better outlet for her anger?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Hi Patricia. I wrote an entire book on this topic because so many parents in my practice have this issue! <https://alysonschafer.com/books/honey-i-wrecked-the-kids/>

I have some quick pointers that could help you here though. I would track the outbursts and pay attention to what the triggers are. In working with families, I typically find that the parents are more apt to be the controlling type, but also inconsistent. Kids lose it when a limit or boundary is arbitrary. Kids like this tend to like rules and limits but they want them to be very fair and consistent. These are kids who want more agency and autonomy, and they really really like to be helpful and competent. Teach her lots of things and give her lots of responsibility!!! Use her power positively! When she gets upset, use active listening which includes paraphrasing what she is saying/ experiencing plus tagging or labeling the emotion she is feeling. For example "It sounds like you really wanted to stay at the park and play longer and you are really angry at me for ruining your fun by saying it's time to go home". It's also important to use your power to control YOURSELF and the SITUATION, but not the child. "I can't make you wash your hands, but I can say that clean hands are a requirement for being at the supper table", "I can't make you brush your teeth, but the old germs need to be removed before more sugar is served."

JAY: Working from home with two young children has been a challenge. Often they need your help or want your attention when you are on a video work call. How do you help a 6 and 9 year old understand that you aren't meaning to push them away ("go away") but that you also need to get your work done. How to maintain a good relationship with your child?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Hey Jay - tough times indeed!!! I have some ideas that could help. One is to create a chit

system - where they get a few chits a day to interrupt your work, but when the chits are done - THAT IS IT!! So they have to think twice before interrupting you. Another is to put a sign system on your door: RED GREEN YELLOW which indicates when they can enter and when they can't. Try to only use the RED for the most important calls that you can't be disturbed on. Write down a schedule of your day that shows them visually, that you will take breaks about every hour for 5 minutes so they can anticipate and delay their gratification better knowing you are going to see them at the top of every hour. This should help them from using the "thin end of the wedge and persist" technique of getting your attention. Lastly, front-load your day. Be FULLY present with them in the morning before you start your workday!!!

FRUSTRATED: How can I get my kid (He's a teen) to do his schoolwork in a timely fashion. This has been going on for years, but with the pandemic it is so much worse. I am working from home and I have to be on his back constantly. It is starting to take its toll and I'm starting to really resent being home.

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Check out Alfie Kohn's book on homework. Research shows it is NOT helping and is actually HINDERING academic performance! That said, it is here for now - so until that changes, it is a teen's responsibility. In order for them to take that responsibility seriously, you have to hand it fully over to them. They know in the back of their minds that you will keep their feet to fire and not let them fail - but it leads to family conflict. :(

Instead - let them know they are old enough to manage their homework independently, and let the chips fall where they may!! After all - you won't be there when they are in college or University. Now is the time for them to learn the skills of time management. If you feel they need some support - you can ask them what help they need - but refuse to be the police to their responsibility. I know this advice is hard for parents. The student might fail a test, a course, a year!!! But they won't take this seriously and figure out how to manage their life if we don't allow them to fail as part of the learning process. Better to do it in high school.

THE PERFECTIONIST: Hi, our twelve-year-old daughter is, what I best describe, a perfectionist. If she gets one

question wrong on a test she get's upset and moody. She wants to do everything but feels she needs to be perfect from the start. We limit the activities so there is balance and support her that making mistakes is ok as it is how we learn. We love her drive but are challenged by the tears and struggles she put's her self through. Any advice on supporting her through this?

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Hi there. Perfectionistic thinking is an albatross! The mistaken idea is "I must be first/best/perfect to ensure that I am safe, secure, worthy, loveable." These are conclusions kids make at a very young age, and we have to bring it to their attention that their worth is NOT predicated on performance and doing well at things. Our culture relies heavily on praising children and moving them along through scales of learning. It is easy to see how a good child wouldn't come to this same conclusion about the value of perfection. Alas - to change the thinking, we have to STOP all forms of praising and move towards messages of encouragement, which emphasizes that mistakes are not personal failures or judgments, but opportunities to learn! Showing them that their goal is about superiority, prestige when they don't have to worry about that - THEY ARE ALREADY WORTHY!!! Just the way they are - they are enough. Carol Dweck has written/youtube about this when she talks about growth vs fixed mindset. I would show those to her. And model being imperfect yourself! There are lots of articles about encouragement versus praise on my website: <https://alysonschafer.com/category/best-parenting-practices/praise-encouragement/>

ALYSON SCHAFFER: Thank you everyone for your great questions and willingness to participate today! I hope this has been helpful. Join me any Wednesday on my FB page for a live Q&A if you would like to ask me more questions.

DR. DEANNE SIMMS:

Thanks, everyone for your great questions today!

It was great to be able to answer some of the things on your mind. I hope you all enjoy the rest of your days!

For further questions or follow up, feel free to reach out or find me here:

<https://thrivespacehw.wordpress.com/>

Take good care,

Dr. D. Simms

LIFESPEAK: *Thank you, Dr. Deanne Simms and Alyson Schafer, for sharing your time with us today. We are sorry that we did not have time to take all of the excellent questions that came in. Thanks to all of you for participating!*

Please join us at 1:30 PM ET for our next webchat, Anxiety, Depression, and Mental Health with Dr. Deborah Ledley and Janna Comrie!

Anxiety, Depression, and Other Mental Health Inquiries with Janna Comrie and Dr. Deborah Ledley

Welcome everyone! We are so pleased to have Mental health experts, Janna Comrie and Dr. Deborah Ledley, with us today.

We will begin taking questions promptly at 1:30 PM ET. LifeSpeak will mediate this discussion and will allow or reject questions as they come in. Questions may be edited for length or for clarity. We will not accept questions that include personal attacks, unsubstantiated allegations, vulgar language or libelous statements.

Please note that Dr. Deborah Ledley's and Janna Comrie's answers are purely informational and should in no way replace consultation with a professional. We will do our best to pose all allowable questions today.

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Hello! I am Dr. Ledley. I am excited to be joining you today and look forward to answering your mental health questions!

JANNA COMRIE: Hello Everyone and thank you for joining us today. I'm Janna Comrie. I'm the Director of the Comrie Counselling Corporation and have been a Psychotherapist for over 15 years working primarily with First Responders and their families. I've worked extensively with people suffering from mild anxiety and depression to people who are having difficulty getting out of bed. This topic is so important right now and I'm glad that you're here with your questions. I look forward to answering them!

SULLY: Hello, I find that I often have trouble focusing on things. I get distracted easily and then when I remember that I forgot to do something, or I don't have time to finish a task, I get really stressed and anxious. Could that be something worth seeking professional help for?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Distraction is so common these days with all of our devices sending us alerts and tempting us to-do things besides work! One tip is to eliminate these distractions. Some other tips - figure out the time of day you are most focused and do your most difficult tasks then; make use of to do list ON PAPER (electronic ones tend to get lost amid other distractions), and take frequent, timed breaks as needed. Certainly, you could seek professional help if this has been a long-standing problem and be assessed for attentional issues and discuss whether stimulant medication could help.

SAM: I have anxiety disorder and PTSD and my boss and some colleagues are aware but sometimes I feel like if I bring it up on a bad day I will be crucified for it... how

does one continue to thrive at work but also be true to oneself and not feel like a burden to the company?

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Sam, it's something that you want to talk about when you're having a good day. People unfortunately do need reminders that you're doing your best and yet still have tough days. Bringing it up on a good day, helps you to speak about it when you're at your best and articulate and advocate for yourself when you're feeling good. Sometimes it can be helpful to establish with your manager a key phrase that you can use when you're having a bad day so that you don't need to explain but you can make them aware. I have a client who used something like "well it's a good thing I like Kiwi!". The boss understood that that meant they were having a bad day and the employee didn't feel like they were making excuses or defending themselves.

SQUIRREL: I have adult ADHD and I am finding that during the pandemic it is increasingly difficult to manage. What are some tips for getting it under control during periods of great stress?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: This has been a challenging time for focus and concentration for MANY people. There is so much competing for our attention during the pandemic - especially if we are working from home. One day this week, I was seeing a patient via telehealth, my son was doing his trumpet lesson, and the lawn was being mowed right outside my window. YIKES. That makes it very challenging to focus!!! Biggest tip - be kind to yourself. We are all trying our best right now under less-than-ideal circumstances so show yourself some compassion. Two - minimize distractions. Turn off all your alerts, notifications, etc. Block websites that can

suck you in during the workday. Three - monitor how long you can concentrate before your mind really starts to wander. Then, build in brief, timed breaks (if you lose focus after half an hour, build in a ten-minute break). And I am a huge believer in exercise and sleep. If we are well-rested and our bodies are healthy, it is easier to focus. So, do look out for sleep and try to get some exercise each day, preferably outdoors.

JACKSON: My wife has OCD and Covid has made it much worse. She is also retiring this month & is very fearful of having nothing to do, & OCD will escalate. It has been very difficult for me to live thru this. What do u suggest?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: I am sorry this has been such a difficult time for you and your wife. The good news is that OCD is VERY treatable. The first-line treatment is a kind of cognitive-behavioral therapy called exposure and ritual prevention therapy (EXRP or ERP). Another option is medication - the SRIs like Luvox or Zoloft. OCD usually requires a higher dose of these medications than when they are used for depression. If you would like to drop me a line by visiting www.drdeborahledley.com I can advise you on good clinicians in your area because OCD really requires expert care. OCD also seems to thrive when people have a lot of time to ruminate and to do their compulsions. It would be helpful for your wife to have some structure to her days once she retires. Hopefully, as COVID improves, she can become a volunteer, explore some new hobbies, have regular plans with friends, etc.

KF: How can I tell the difference between anxiety and just being worried. At what point is medical intervention required?

JANNA COMRIE: Worry is a component of anxiety but not the only symptom. Often times when we worry, we have thoughts that get stuck in our heads. With anxiety, however, our body has a full physiological reaction. People with anxiety find that their heart is pounding at times, they may be short of breath, they feel a need to escape or run away. They notice changes in appetite and sleep. They often find that places that they used to go, things that they used to do, or people that they were previously comfortable with start to make them uncomfortable and they may go as far as avoiding them.

While these are not the only symptoms of anxiety, they are the most common ones. If you've been experiencing these other symptoms for a month, I would suggest reaching out to a professional who can assess your own unique situation.

LOLA: I have extreme anxiety about all situations in my life. I know there are triggers, but are there things that can be done to help alleviate these. Makes it extremely difficult to go about a regular day when your mind is constantly wondering/worrying

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Lola,

There are many strategies that can be learned to help you manage/alleviate your anxiety. The brain is designed in such a way that the more we avoid situations/triggers, the more we teach our minds to be afraid of them. This creates a higher baseline level of anxiety that we walk around with. Think of anxiety as being a stick of dynamite. You have a wick attached to it. Your wick right now is short so that you're probably trying to avoid the triggers because you know that they'll set you off. A good therapist can help you lengthen your wick so that it takes a lot more to actually trigger you. This means you won't avoid to nearly the same extent and generally will function better day-to-day.

DOIREANN: Looking for practical advice on dealing with anxiety in the workplace when time is limited (in particular tight/unreasonable deadlines that I have no control over). I'm good at calming myself after working hours (nature, reading novels, creative pursuits etc.) but not with stopping myself from a 2pm spiral of anxiety.

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Doireann,

So many people are struggling with workloads/days like yours and it's really tough! I like to introduce my clients to what I call micro-breaks. This is when they take 1-3 minutes to just mentally relax - it can include listening to a favorite song or comedian, a one-minute meditation, relaxation breathing, stretching, taking a quick walk around your work area. These little breaks can be implemented with very little impact on your day. If you're taking one each hour, you're likely only adding 10-15 minutes to your workday but giving your brain little moments to relax.

JOAN: My sister keeps recommending therapy to me. Yet I'm working on myself and can't justify how much happier I'll be after a \$250 session. Plus I'm not a big talker so not sure how beneficial it will be. Should I still give it a try?

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Joan, I'm a big believer in people needing to be ready and open to therapy. A therapist's job is to help you discuss things that you might find difficult and to help you understand what is getting in your way. If you're making progress on your own, then continue what you're doing. If you find that you're getting stuck or that your progress isn't happening the way that you'd like it to, then you may want to seek professional help. Remember, your feeling of comfort and your rapport with the therapist make all the difference. So, if you decide to go the therapy route, you may need to do some research so that you find someone you click with.

MOM: My son has anxiety at school. On average he is a happy, outgoing child. When it comes to school I am getting calls (daily or every other day from the teacher/guidance counselor) about him being upset or having a panic attack, he feels something bad is going to happen to those he cares about while he is at school, he has started to turn from crying to making himself physically sick, making himself vomit or causing physical harm to make the pain more physical maybe avoiding his emotional state.

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Poor guy! It sounds like he is having a rough time. We would conceptualize this as separation anxiety - fear of something bad happening to oneself or one's parents when you are not together. Does he have any worries about separation in other situations? For example, many kids with separation anxiety cannot be in rooms or on floors of the house alone, cannot play in the yard alone, can't do playdates or activities, etc. These would be great situations to work on with him to start teaching him some coping skills that he can then use at school. I strongly recommend the book "Freeing Your Child from Anxiety" by my friend and colleague Tamar Chansky. It will teach you so much about anxiety and help you to talk about anxiety in a different way with your son. It also would be very reasonable to seek the help of a pediatric anxiety expert

in your area. Happy to help you find one if you want to drop me a line by visiting www.drdeborahledley.com.

YVONNE: I've had extreme anxiety this last year due to COVID. More recently I have been regretting getting my Astra Zeneca vaccine due to all the conflicting information reported in the press. I know this is not logical but I can not help but to be affected by other people's decision and news reports. Any tips on how to focus on the positive and not look back and regret your decisions?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: If you are a person who has always had anxiety about health concerns, I am not surprised that your anxiety has now glommed on to the vaccine as a new target. Have you worried about other health issues before and then ended up being fine? For example - I've had many patients who fear they have cancer from some mysterious bump or rash. I currently have a patient who has a new health concern regularly ranging from an esophageal tear from eating a bagel chip to having alcohol poisoning after drinking one drink. This all fits into Illness Anxiety Disorder. When you worry about the vaccine, the key is to stop reassuring yourself, checking in on possible side effects, or using Dr. Google or other people to address your concerns. Instead, you can actually say, "Maybe I'll be fine from this vaccine, maybe I won't.". It sounds crazy, but as soon as you stop having a logical discussion with the anxiety voice in your head, it will get quieter. And, let me say it again - NO CHECKING or REASSURING!!!!

ASHLEY: Sometimes I feel like I get anxiety out of nowhere. And I don't know what triggers it

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Perhaps you are having panic attacks - they can come on completely out of the blue in situations you don't expect to feel nervous or anxious. This can be unnerving since they can happen while you are home watching TV, or in the car driving somewhere, or sitting at your desk at work. A problem can develop if you start to associate panic attacks with where they happen. For example, if you have a panic attack while driving and then decide you should not drive anymore! With panic, it is important to remember that the anxious feelings tend to come on and then peak in about ten minutes. The feelings are uncomfortable but not dangerous. Reminding yourself of this really helps.

Also, it is best to try to continue what you are doing when panic sets in. You might not be totally focused, but try to continue watching your show, doing your work, or driving to where you are going - again, because the feelings are uncomfortable but not dangerous. The more times you have this experience, the less bothersome the panic attacks should be.

TRYING: I have been dealing with grief for several years, almost non stop for over a decade and was also diagnosed with anxiety. It affects almost everything I usually would do and especially has adversely affected my work. I don't know if I should advise my supervisor

JANNA COMRIE: Grief can be very difficult for people to process when they aren't dealing with other mental health issues. Informing your employer can be beneficial but there needs to be a plan to go with it. You want to be able to say to yourself and also to your manager that you're working on it and that there is a plan to do things differently. This might mean seeking therapy or group counseling or switching therapists if you've been working with someone for an extended period of time and things aren't getting better.

TERRY: I get anxious presenting on Zoom and when I use notes get feedback that I should not look like I am reading. This has me not wanting to present. How do I get over it?

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Terry, we get anxious doing activities that we're not practiced at! I'm willing to bet you did presentations pre-zoom and had no problems. With the onset of pandemic-related restrictions, I've spoken with countless people struggling with online presentations. It's not the same as presenting in person. You're dependent on technology that you probably didn't use pre-pandemic very often and people are presenting from their homes which often interferes with the work mindset. So, here are some tips: First, have a designated workspace in your home. Second, practice using Zoom with yourself - yes, I know this sounds odd, but you can host a meeting with a work computer and a cell phone. This allows you to practice sharing your screen, speaking to a screen, and gives you practice using the software. Before you present, do something or watch something that makes you laugh - the good endorphins help to make everything a little easier! When you're

in Zoom speaking, make a point of looking at one or two people. This gives you a more natural appearance while presenting. If you find that intimidating, speak to a painting or item in the background of their screen.

YOLI: I just lost my dad to suicide, and almost just lost my son the same way. Ever since I have been getting anxiety. I want to deal with it in a non medicated way

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Yoli,

First, my sincere condolences for your loss and the difficulties you are facing. It is really normal in situations like the ones that you are dealing with to feel anxious. First, the basics are important - taking care of yourself, diet, exercise, social time, and sleep. These things are hard to do when you're feeling anxious. I would suggest that you reach out to a professional who has experience dealing with trauma and with survivors after suicide. They can help you work through the underlying issues, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors that are driving the anxiety.

HK: I find myself getting so anxious these days with the pressures of lockdown life, and the stress of dealing with young children and family problems involving aging parents. I end up losing my patience easily and yelling. Then I go into a shame spiral. I feel like my head is a jumble of thoughts and worries competing for time. I need some strategies, please.

JANNA COMRIE: Hi HK,

Being part of the sandwich generation isn't easy! The most important thing is that to take care of others, you need to take care of you! I know this sounds like one more task in a list of daily tasks but it does make a difference. When I'm talking to parents like yourself, they're not eating regularly, sleeping, taking breaks, or getting exercise. Our minds are not designed to run at 110% all day long! Make a point of doing small things for yourself - eat regularly and well, take a bath, go for a walk, do an art project, dance, exercise, watch your favorite comedian. The more you take care of yourself, the better you feel. The better you feel, the more resources you have to take care of others.

BRY: How can I help a spouse who is feeling anxious and defeated due to the pandemic? I am trying to listen

and stay positive, and do my best to be as supportive as I can, but it feels like they are sometimes stuck in a negative thought loop.

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Bry,

It's so wonderful that you want to help! Validation is key here. Often when we are trying to stay positive, we actually discount the other person's feeling. When this happens and they feel (even subconsciously) that they aren't being heard, it amps the feelings (in this case, negativity) up. Think about this conversation:

Person A: My foot is really hurting.

Person B: I'm sure it's nothing. You'll be fine.

Person A: No really, it's pretty painful.

Person B: I'm sure it's no big deal.

Person A: Seriously, when I step down, the whole top of my foot hurts...

You see how person A gets more specific and more negative with each exchange. If person B said "I'm sorry to hear. Would you like to put it up?" right off the bat, they would never get the whole explanation of what's wrong. It doesn't mean person B has to agree with the feeling, but by saying, "I get why you feel that way", "I'm sorry it's getting to you", or something "I totally see that you're not feeling good" it often minimizes the negative response coming back.

HERB: How do you get rid of physical sensations that come about when you are anxious or stressed. Even when trying to focus on something else or distract myself, the physical sensation remains. For me, the physical sensation is tingling in the face.

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: It is hard to get rid of physical symptoms. Bodies are "noisy" and do what they do when we are anxious or activated in other ways. I'd be curious to know if you experience this tingling when you exercise or get really excited or angry about something. It might just be that this is what your body does, in much the same way as some people blush or some people hands shake or sweat. If we were working together, I would want to spend some time talking to you about why this symptom is a problem for you. Are you worried that it

will distract you and you will make mistakes? Are you worried that it is noticeable in some way? Does it make you worry that something is physically wrong with you? I would want to explore these beliefs and address any faulty thinking about the physical symptoms. Also, people sometimes do subtle things to try to make their physical symptoms go away. Paradoxically, these subtle "safety behaviors" often backfire and make the symptoms worse. So, I would want to talk to you about that - when you feel this, what do you do in response to it? It is possible that simply doing nothing and accepting that this is just how your body behaves will improve the whole problem significantly.

FRED: I feel a lot of anxiety surrounding workload during our busy times and want some advice on how to set effective boundaries while still being a team player? I often find myself going well past my limit because if I set a boundary for the good of my mental health, it means more work for other team mates who are experiencing the same issue.

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Fred,

It can be extremely difficult to set boundaries at work. It is, however, extremely important that you do for the integrity of your work, your mental and physical health. I think it's important that when you set boundaries that you do it with this in mind. If you are burning yourself out, a teammate is likely going to have to step in to help anyway. I know it's easy to feel like you're letting your team down, but remember, they all have the ability to set appropriate boundaries for themselves. Often, when one person on a team sets boundaries, others do the same. Management can then communicate appropriate timelines and the workload is shuffled accordingly or additional resources are acquired. If no one sets boundaries, management doesn't necessarily think that there is an issue and everyone pays for it!

AMY: How do you know when you should seek medical help (ie pharmaceuticals) for managing your anxiety vs. tools like self-care, talk therapy, etc.?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Great question. Self-care is a term thrown around a lot these days and I fear it makes people feel like they are doing something wrong if they are engaging in self-care, but their anxiety isn't

getting better. While sleep, exercise, yoga, mindfulness, etc. are all good for anxiety - they are NOT standalone treatments. If you have clinically significant anxiety - that is, anxiety that is causing you significant distress and/or impairment in functioning, the first-line treatment is cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). You can certainly try some self-help CBT using the many excellent manuals available - check out the abct.org or adaa.org websites for manuals vetted by our professional organizations. These websites also have a "find a therapist" function to help you find therapists who do CBT. If after 6-8 sessions of CBT, you are not seeing improvement - or if you are not functioning well at all - seeking medication would be your next step. There are many effective medications available for the treatment of anxiety.

DM: This pandemic seems to have brought some personal habits or stresses to the forefront for me. I have been working from home for +1 year, assisting other departments. I was told recently that my return to the workplace was imminent, and that brought up such a heavy rush of anxiety, stress, lack of sleep, negative thoughts. I am now on a sick leave, following a doctor's evaluation. What would be the best way to approach the inevitable return to the office? thank you

JANNA COMRIE: This is one that so many people are having difficulty with! I'm encouraging clients to start by implementing their work routine at home through a series of more and more work-related tasks. For example, get up at work time, shower, get dressed eat breakfast as you would. Do this for a few days or until you're comfortable with it. Once you're comfortable with that, start packing your lunch or take breaks throughout the day as if you were in the office. Again, get comfortable before you add more. Some clients find it helpful to take the route to work prior to having to go inside and get used to that part of the routine again. If you're having trouble determining a good sequence for you, speak to a mental health professional about exposure therapy and they can help you set a plan for yourself to make it easier.

MARILYN: I was diagnosed with ADHD about 3 years ago and prescribed Vyvanse of which the dosage has to keep on being increased in order to help me focus. I was recently prescribed Citalopram to help with my

anxiety and slight depression but it makes me drowsy so I can't take it during the day when I need it the most. I have heard from others who get depressed in taking the Vyvanse. My two adult sons live with me and have ADHD but one son refuses to see a doctor or take any meds so he is not very productive. Wish I could help him but he is an adult so I make him get help.

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: I am a psychologist, not a psychiatrist so I do not prescribe medication. But, some general thoughts. Your doctor can advise you when to take the Citalopram to make you less drowsy. Because this medication stays in your system over a longer time (compared to ADD meds), it SHOULD help with your anxiety and depression during the day regardless of what time of day you take it. It is also super important with the Citalopram that you take it every day and don't suddenly stop or skip days here and there. That would definitely make you feel not well.

Combining ADD meds and antidepressants is a balancing act. Many people need both and find the combination very effective. I do not know who is prescribing your medication, but I always recommend seeking the help of a psychiatrist in these situations rather than a general practitioner or internist. A psychiatrist will be able to figure out the balance of each and if you are still feeling depressed, can either adjust the dose of your Citalopram or try you on another medication.

UGH: I exercise, meditate, eat well, sleep well and generally take care of myself and am a positive person, however, every morning I wake up with a feeling of dread, self-doubt, and anxiety. It eventually fades throughout the day but returns the next morning. How can stop this cycle?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Good for you for all these super habits. I've had several patients who wake up with this morning dread. My main tip is to get out of bed as soon as your alarm goes off. I have found that people tend to lie in bed and pay attention to this feeling and listen to the negative thoughts - which then makes it harder to get up. Feet on the ground is a good mantra! It might also be that your brain and body are programmed to have this feeling in the morning and perhaps you can re-train your brain. Can you put on some cheery music in the morning? Do some jumping jacks? Have some really

nice smelling, pleasant beauty products in your shower that cheer you up? It sounds silly, but I do believe brains get in the habit of feeling a certain way even after there is no longer a reason for that feeling. One other idea, once you get out of bed, is to write down your thoughts/worries. What do you fear will happen during the day? Then, check-in with these worries at the end of the day. Did they come to pass or were they junk mail in your brain? Doing this for several weeks in a row might show you that you have the same worries every morning but the bad thing never happens. At that point, you can tell your brain - "this is junk mail, delete!" Or, "brain, you are telling me lies. Leave me alone so I can get on with my day!"

SYDELLE: I have mixed anxiety and depression disorder, I can't get people to understand that there are times I just need to be alone. How can I best explain this without people getting upset at me for turning them down?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Great question. Two thoughts pop to my mind here. One, everyone needs to feel comfortable setting limits that feel right to them and we should all surround ourselves with people who respect our needs. AND, two - we know that getting out and doing things tends to be very healthy for people with depression. When you are feeling down, and when many situations make you anxious, the inclination of course is to stay home. We know, however, that participating in activities that give you a sense of mastery and pleasure really boosts the mood. I suggest to patients that they think about things on their schedules as medicine - we don't decide whether to take medicine for mood based on how we feel. We take it every day SO THAT we feel well. Same with activity - don't make decisions based on how you feel - participate and then see how you feel. Generally, when we get out and do something, we tend to feel better than if we stay home. I know it seems like these two thoughts are contradictory - but a goal can be finding a balance between pushing yourself to do more when you don't feel well and not doing so much that you exhaust yourself and never have a chance to refuel with your alone time.

ID: How can you differentiate between grief (from losing a loved one) and depression?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: This is a challenging question. With grief, we typically feel empty and experience a feeling of loss while with depression, people experience a depressed mood and a loss of interest in things they usually enjoy. Grief tends to improve over time, which includes very happy memories of the loved ones, and includes preoccupation with the lost loved one. In contrast, with depression, we tend to hear a preoccupation with self-critical thoughts - thoughts of worthlessness, not being deserving, etc. And, with grief, thoughts of death usually include a wish of joining with the lost loved one whereas, in depression, thoughts of death typically include self-harm due to feelings of worthless, loss of hope, or inability to cope with pain. People who are grieving can of course ALSO be depressed and a good clinician will spend time seeing how all these pieces fit together.

CONCERNED: My 12yo daughter has anxiety. It is affecting her daily when it comes to participating in activities, being around people, any new things. She gets nervous and sick to her stomach and doesn't want to go. We tend to 'force' her to because once she is there and participating then she is okay. Not sure if this is the best approach though. I've also talked to her about talking to a professional about this, but she does not want to do that, so how do we get her appropriate help?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Anxiety is very common in kids, and therapists who treat pediatric anxiety have been overwhelmed with patients in the past year. COVID has definitely intensified these concerns because we had so many months when kids did not have to do their feared activities - and now we are getting back to school and life outside the home and kids are really struggling. It is great that you are "forcing" your daughter to participate. Anxiety is maintained due to avoidance. Once we get kids into situations they see (a) that their anxiety goes down the longer they stay; (b) that they can cope in the situation even if they are anxious; and (c) most things parents choose for their kids are FUN. So, after activities, do a little "post-processing" - not in an "I told you so" sort of way, but just asking your daughter, so how did it turn out? What did you learn? These discussions lead to meaningful changes in thinking and future behavior.

If your daughter is not keen on seeing a therapist, there

are a few options. One is to buy her a self-help book like “What to do When You Worry Too Much” or my book, “The Worry Workbook for Kids”. Just leave it in her room and she might end up checking it out! The other is to say she must see a therapist and be open to trying 4-6 sessions. Remember, you are the parent and we do not ask our kids if they want to see the pediatrician or other medical doctors. If you think she would benefit from therapy, stick to your guns and avoid endless discussion when she first starts - say, we are going to give this a good try and after a month or so, let’s chat about it and see what we think.

NIC: I am waking up with panic attacks about work around 2-3am and then I am frozen...I can’t sleep, I can’t work, I just lie there and cry waiting for my alarm to go off... how do you turn off the unconscious mind?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: This sounds rough. It sounds like your brain is now in the habit of waking up at 3 am and of course, if we are tired, it is more likely we will also be anxious during the day. I might talk to your doctor about some anxiety medication. In the meantime, when you wake up, could you try to react differently to the panic? It sounds like you are getting very upset, which will wake you up even more. Instead, you could practice some breathing exercises and coach yourself that the feelings are uncomfortable, but not dangerous and will pass within about ten minutes. If laying in bed is too hard, you can get up and use the bathroom (keep the lights dim so as to not wake your brain up too much) and when you come back to bed, try to change the channel in your brain from the panic to something else. For example, you could try to engage all your senses in picturing a relaxing place that you like to visit like the beach or a hiking trail. There are some great self-help books on panic - check out the [New Harbinger Press](#) website for some good ones.

JULES: My wife has bipolar disorder. Recently, she went off her meds and did all kinds of crazy stuff, including having an affair. She was hospitalized and is back on her meds. Now she wants to come back to our home and live as if nothing ever happened. I don’t know what to do. I love my wife but she is pretty messed up and so is this situation.

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Jules,

First, that’s so tough for both of you! This is a situation in which I would highly recommend psychotherapy for her and perhaps a support group for you. These groups help people to understand what their partner is dealing with in a different way. In addition, marriage counseling would also be very important. You can’t simply pretend nothing has happened. It’s like trying to un-ring a bell!

NOWHERE: I find myself feeling sadness and want crying for any reason, any moment. My only comfort I found out its my dog, and when I am at home. its hard to explain to others. I found myself many times during the day, going to the bathroom and put myself together . The feeling is horrible, and my chest hurts. what to do?

JANNA COMRIE: In a situation like this, my first suggestion would be to speak to your PCP or GP. What you’ve described could be caused by a physiological issue as much as a psychological issue. Oftentimes, clients will have bloodwork done and learn that they are low or high in something. In addition, I recommend speaking to a mental health professional. You’re struggling with something and feeling poorly more often than not is an indicator that it’s time for some help.

HELP: I have what I call “Bad Brain Days” I wake up and feel odd but i can’t explain it. On these days I can’t eat without feeling nauseous, I feel a weight on my chest and the slightest thing can trigger me and suddenly I’m crying the rest of the day. Is this anxiety?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: This could be anxiety. Nausea and chest pressure are both symptoms of panic, as is “a feeling of unreality” which might correspond to your “bad brain days”. It is certainly worth seeing an anxiety expert about this. One tip I have is to eat even if you don’t feel like it. Low blood sugar can mimic the feelings of panic - so although the eating is making you feel nauseated, it is probably better than not eating and feeling shakier and out of it. I might also track when these events happen and take this along to your doctor. I do not know if you are male or female, but I wonder about the role of hormones.

CALI: I find a glass of wine reduces my very anxious moments. I understand that this is the wrong thing to do, but it has a calming effect and let’s me think straight again. I do the physical, reading, breath of fresh air etc,

but they don't seem to "relax" my brain. What can I do to stop this?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: You are not alone - a recent study reported that 1 in 4 adults report drinking more alcohol to cope with stress during the COVID pandemic. If you were my patient, I would want to spend some time exploring whether indeed this is the "wrong" thing to do. People do all sorts of things in response to anxiety - eating a bowl of ice cream, drinking a glass of wine, watching junky stuff on TV. My question is - is that getting in the way of your functioning? Do you have one glass of wine a few nights a week once your other work/family commitments are taken care of? Or do you have a glass of wine during the workday or several glasses of wine each night, so you are too hungover in the morning to function well? The latter is clearly more problematic than the former! Perhaps it is okay to enjoy your occasional glass of wine! AND another way to learn to quiet your brain might be to incorporate the practice of mindfulness into your day. This could also be very helpful to you. You could try the [Headspace](#) app - it is affordable and really effective.

IMPERFECTLY PERFECT: I have struggled with generalized anxiety disorder and panic attacks for months. I tried pharmacological approaches with my physician and ended up suffering severe side effects from the medications as a result and ended up feeling worse while on meds. What suggestions do you have from a holistic, non-pharmacological to assist with deescalating anxiety?

JANNA COMRIE: Anxiety is our body's threat detection system being activated. At times, it's totally appropriate, and other times, it results in generalized anxiety. There are many things that one can do to help. A healthy diet, regular (3-4 times/week) exercise, good sleep habits, social times with friends and good stress management often help. Using meditation and other relaxation strategies (art, hobbies, music) are also extremely useful. With generalized anxiety, self-talk also becomes really important. People often don't validate their experiences. They tell themselves that they're "being silly" or "just get over it." The way that you speak to yourself can have a significant impact. You want to be your own best friend. If you are unsure about how to implement any of these,

please speak to a mental health professional. They can often provide guidance about how to make strategies work in your unique life.

VERY CONFUSED BY MYSELF: I am also confused and having a tough time because I have taken all the self assessment questionnaires and based on those results I have major depressive disorder and an anxiety disorder but either my subconscious mind or conscious mind refuses to accept this and states it's just due to circumstance. Is there a way of dealing with this?

JANNA COMRIE: While self-assessments can be helpful, they don't necessarily capture everything. It sounds like you're dealing with some things in your life that may be contributing to your day-to-day mood. Speaking to a mental health professional would help you to determine if this is all situational or if there are things that you could be doing differently to help move you out of this psychological state. It's better to seek help earlier especially if the contributing environmental factors aren't likely to change any time soon.

FEELING BULLIED: Within my usual social circles (mostly the parents of my kid's friends), I am finding that many are anti-pandemic, anti-social distancing, anti-masks, anti-vaccination, etc. I am more of a rule follower and want to comply with all the recommendations. I appear to be the only one in my social groups that feels this way and it is at the point where I feel like we are being bullied and that our friends think we are being "stupid" for buying into it. It has been bothering me a lot, but I am more concerned about how my kids are being treated because we are trying to follow the rules. Any advice?

JANNA COMRIE: This can be so tough! I often tell parents in situations like this to stick to their beliefs. You want to teach your kids that just because someone else is doing it, or just because it's right for someone else, doesn't necessarily mean it's right for you. You can totally respect their positions and their choices while recognizing that that doesn't work for you. Often, when we express it to others from a position of "I'm not judging you. You're doing what's right for you", they understand the unspoken communication of "I'm doing what's right for me". Talking this openly also helps your children to know what to say and how to stand their

ground without being offensive, judging, or joining in with the bullying.

PERPLEXED: My BFF has PTSD and high anxiety. I'm often at a loss on how to support without enabling. It's also affecting me in the sense that they will mention things that are directly habits of mine. It's difficult to not take it personally and will admit has caused a few personal meltdowns which i've kept to myself.

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: I wish I could hear more about this difficult situation. My thought with this very little bit of information is that PTSD and anxiety should not, in and of themselves, cause interpersonal problems. I wonder if there is more going on with your friend than just these diagnoses - perhaps some relational/interpersonal skills that she needs to work on? Keeping the effect of her behaviors to yourself is going to do her no favors. You are her BFF and you sound like a very good person :) But, if she is critical of others' habits, they may not react so considerably if they don't know her background. Perhaps it might make sense to actually share more with her - "When you X, it makes me feel Y". Also, it sounds like she could really benefit from therapy. A BFF can't take on that role, but you can encourage her to seek the help that she needs.

BM: Hello, I am a first year university student and now I am also working part-time as well as volunteering online. Would you be able to help me with some stress relievers for the end of a busy day? sometimes it seems impossible to shut off my brain. Thanks!

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Kudos to you for making it through your first year of university during a global pandemic! It's been such a tough year, particularly for people in your age group. You sound like you have a ton on your plate. Here are some favorite stress relief ideas - exercise (particularly outdoors in the fresh air - doesn't have to be vigorous - a nice walk in a pretty place is great); giving yourself a break between work and homework that is just frivolous and fun like watching a show or reading a magazine; practicing mindfulness (try the [Headspace](#) app); find a hobby that you enjoy like drawing, painting, music, yoga, etc. Hope this helps!

ANNETTE: My son came out as transwoman last year. She's been taking hormones for a year now. It's been

a huge adjustment needless to say. I went through mourning him and it was difficult. I still can't understand what makes a person want to be another gender. I've read about it, they say it is not a mental illness but how can it not be? Any enlightenment would be appreciated

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: This is, of course, a huge challenge for many parents. You are adjusting to your child having a new name, a new appearance, a new identity, and so on and it is so much to digest. I commend you for reading about it and for trying to understand and be supportive. The best piece of advice I can give is to join a support group of other parents that is facilitated by an expert in the field. I think it will be a comfort to hear that other parents are thinking and feeling the same thing as you are. It might also help to hear from parents who are at other points in this journey - you are in the early days and it might give you hope to hear that it begins to feel better with the passage of time.

ANONYMOUS: Where/how do you go about getting diagnosed with an anxiety or mental health disorder? Things in my life have indicated that I may have an anxiety disorder, but I want a professional assessment and not to self-diagnose.

JANNA COMRIE: A psychiatrist or psychologist can provide a proper assessment and treatment plan. You can check with your EAP provider for a referral to a professional in your area.

HELP NEEDED: I've had anxiety my entire life. Covid has made it worse as I've lost the random conversations that keep some positivity in my life. My spouse tries to help but feels helpless at times. I'm worried about my work and that I'm under performing. I am working too much from morning to night, and having difficulty talking to my family at end of day and task switching on weekends. My husband and I have talked about divorce, it's been coming for a long time. I am a manager, I don't feel I have the same support and that it will penalize me. I know I should seek medical help. I'm not sure how to approach this with work that is a major contributing factor.

JANNA COMRIE: A lot of management are feeling like they are there for their staff but that they've been left out! I would start by speaking to a psychotherapist

(potentially one who could do marital counseling). They will help you examine the unique culture within your workplace and the upper management that you report to. They can help you come up with a plan to address this in the healthiest possible way and can help with how to approach your employer. This is a common starting place in therapy and it's something that we help people figure out all the time.

T: I have been experiencing intrusive thoughts that really bothers and scares me. I am hesitant to take medication as I don't feel physicians really follow up on your mental health and at the end, its up to you to decide taking meds or not. How I am capable of such decision. For how long? what about co-dependency?

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: I would really need to know more about your intrusive thoughts to guide you in the right direction, but generally intrusive thoughts are part of obsessive-compulsive disorder. People can experience very disturbing thoughts like fear of accidentally harming themselves or others; fearing of doing something sexually deviant; or fear of insulting God or communing with the devil. On glance, these seem like pretty awful thoughts. But, in the world of OCD, we see these as "junk mail" in the brain. Interestingly, all people experience intrusive thoughts - most people recognize them, say "wow, that's an odd thought" and dismiss them. But people with OCD are scared by them and start doing things to try to get rid of the thoughts, get rid of anxiety, or prevent bad things from happening (these are the compulsions in OCD). If you are unsure about medication, I would start by reading a really good self-help book on OCD or finding an expert OCD therapist in your area. Exposure and ritual prevention therapy (EXRP or ERP) is a form of cognitive-behavioral therapy and is the gold standard treatment for OCD. It is perfectly reasonable to try this approach before trying medication.

CARISSA: any suggestions on how we help our loved ones understand what we are feeling/going through when we are feeling anxious? its hard to explain and sometimes explaining it makes me feel stupid...

JANNA COMRIE: Hi Carissa,

If you've never felt something before, it can be very difficult to understand. I often use the example of

driving in a car and having a near miss (miss of having an accident). You're body kicks in and breaks and steers you through the intersection but then two blocks down the road you feel your heart pounding and your hands shaking. Or the example of something startling you in a movie. I talk about it being the same system in the body that kicks in and at times doesn't settle down. They may not fully understand but often it gives them an idea.

DN: I'm a mom of 3 young adults. My youngest is 21 and not working due to covid. He stays in his room most of the day and when he is out, he just walk a path from the bathroom to the kitchen over and over, then is up muttering to himself most of the night. I think he is depressed, but does not want to hear anything about speaking with our family dr. He and his brother has had a physical altercation, him and his sister are verbally at each other and my husband is wanting him out of the house. I'm scared and don't know what to do.

JANNA COMRIE: Hi DN,

It's so important that you have open communication with your son where you express changes that you've observed, love, and concern. This needs to be something on an ongoing basis. Often, when things become physical in a household, it's easier to say "this can't continue. You need to speak to the doctor". That said, it's important that you ask him what he thinks is going on. Listening to him without judgment or trying to fix it will encourage him to speak. These types of situations take time to improve and the covid situation is not helping. But open communication where he is being heard (even if you don't agree to give him the opportunity to talk about his feelings/realities) can often start shifting these situations.

ANXIOUS: I recognize that I have been using avoidance as an unhealthy way to deal with my anxiety, and have difficulty making decisions in times of higher anxiety. What kind of strategies can you suggest to help me when faced with something that seems overwhelming? How does one begin exposure therapy to help with avoidance?

JANNA COMRIE: I'm going to speak to your second question first. When you are beginning exposure therapy you want to start with a list of things related to 1 type of anxiety using progressive steps. For example, if it

were anxious in “crowds” you could create an exposure sequence for that. It might look something like this:

- 1) watching people out of my wind
- 2) walking down a side street
- 3) driving to a park where there are more people (staying in the car)
- 4) Driving to the park and getting out but staying away from people
- 5) walking closer with people in the park
- 6) going to a plaza with many stores and walking around the parking lot
- 7) going into a store with people during quiet hours
- 8) going into a store during moderately busy hours
- 9) going into a store at the busiest time of day.

In this type of plan, you want to be reasonably comfortable with a step before going on to the next one. The key is, you stop avoiding what you’re afraid of. At the end of this progression, you may never love crowds, but they won’t be debilitating.

MOVE ALONG: I have been needing to make changes & have wanted to try different job opportunities. A main reason is that I have worked in the same group for years & went through a lot in my personal life during those years. Staying in the same group is a constant reminder of pain from the past. The problem is when I do get a chance for a new opportunity, I feel like I’m going to die in the interview. My throat tightens and I can’t speak well. It is so bad that I want to cry in the interview & get distracted trying to tune out flashbacks. Talking about work I did before, reminds me of what I was going through during those periods & it’s hard to dissociate. I cried in a practice interview & even just watching other people do a job interview on television, makes me feel sick to my stomach. I feel trapped. In order to start new I feel I need to be able to do well in interviews. More practice should help, but it seems to be making things worse because of the memories they stir up.

JANNA COMRIE: It sounds like you’ve got a lot of your past coming into your present. Often when the

subconscious mind does this, it does this with the intention of protecting you - It never wants you to experience what you experienced in the past again so it holds it in front of your face. I’ve had a number of clients with this type of past interfering with the present do well with Rapid Resolution Therapy. This is a unique approach that helps people keep the past in the past and move forward. It may be worthwhile to look into someone who is a certified provider in your area.

MOMMESS: I am the mother of 3 kids, 16-21, who are all caring, awesome individuals. Despite this, they are all messy and lazy around the house. I know this comes with their age to some degree, and have always tried to be chill about it while providing guidance and help. But lately I’m finding their rooms have gone from messy to complete disarray, littered with dirty dishes, food containers, garbage, laundry everywhere. This continues for weeks and weeks without being addressed. I like to keep the house orderly and clean, and am an organized person, so I’m really finding this is stressing me out. I’ve asked them repeatedly to address, always in a respectful way, being fair and clear about what I would like them to do and by when. More and more, they just blow me off. I’m conscious that they are navigating the pandemic too, so have tried to give them latitude, but I am finding that I’m now taking it personally and am becoming angry and resentful from their lack of respect and common courtesy. Any advice?

JANNA COMRIE: Hi MomMess,

I think sitting down with your kids and asking why they haven’t been addressing the issue is appropriate. Explaining that while they do have “their rooms” they are in a home that YOU are ultimately responsible for. I would ask them what they think are solutions to this problem and I often encourage parents to have a couple of solutions at the ready - whether it’s if you’ve asked 3 times and it’s not done within 24 hours of the last ask, you’ll go in and “clean” it (most adult children do not like having their parents cleaning their rooms) or having a housekeeper come in once a month and if it isn’t clean enough for her to do what she/he needs to, everything goes in garbage bags so the room can be clean. This often gets movement happening!

A FRIEND: I have a very close friend who has anxiety.

What are some ways I can support her? It hurts me to see her upset or deal with certain things that make her anxious that I can't fix. I always try to listen, but I want her to know I support her and am there for her.

JANNA COMRIE: It's wonderful that they have a friend like you! Some great ways to support are:

- Validate - "I get that you're anxious and it's okay", "I can see why you're anxious"
- Ask what strategies they find most useful in certain situations and then you know when to remind them of them
- Encourage healthy, balanced living (diet, exercise, sleep, etc.)
- Try to encourage conversations that allow them to take a break from the anxiety - fun or interesting things
- Ask them if they know what they need. If they do, you may be able to try to provide it.

JBK: As a young person, how can I deal with having an increasingly pessimistic outlook towards other people and current society in general? I used to be so positive but for the last few years I feel like I'm seeing people's/ society's "true colors" and I've gotten more and more sour. Seeing the levels of ignorance and selfishness during a global pandemic (people not wearing masks, ignoring science, spreading misinformation, etc) has certainly not helped. I don't like feeling this way and assuming the worst in others all the time.

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: This has indeed been a very challenging few years. I've worked with kids and teens for 20+ years and until the past few years, the state of the world hadn't really come up in therapy. To be honest, I see this as a very positive thing - although I feel bad that young people are stressed, I am thrilled that they are engaged with the world and care so much about what is going on. It can be hard to look at something like a global pandemic and feel like there is anything that one person can do to make a difference. So, I suggest finding one thing you care about and setting a goal to make a SMALL difference. I love classical music and pre-pandemic, attended concerts all the time. I started to volunteer for our orchestra and sometimes it just felt like we were

throwing fancy parties. So, I became an orchestra docent and I now go into inner-city schools to teach kids about the orchestra before they attend a real, live orchestra concert. This activity has given me a tiny feeling that I am making a difference at a time when so much around us felt so hopeless. Could you find something that speaks to you?

JANNA COMRIE: I want to thank you all for your wonderful questions! I'm sorry that we weren't able to get to all of them. Stay safe and be well!

Janna

DR. DEBORAH LEDLEY: Thanks for all your great questions! Take care, everyone! - Dr. Ledley.

LIFESPEAK: *Thank you, Janna Comrie and Dr. Deborah Ledley, for sharing your time with us today. We are sorry that we did not have time to take all of the excellent questions that came in. Thanks to all of you for participating!*

Please join us at 4 PM ET for our next webchat, Mental Health and Relationships with Dr. Joshua Coleman!

Mental Health and Relationships with Dr. Joshua Coleman

Welcome everyone! We are so pleased to have PhD, Psychologist and Author, Dr. Joshua Coleman, with us today.

We will begin taking questions promptly at 4:00 PM ET. LifeSpeak will mediate this discussion and will allow or reject questions as they come in. Questions may be edited for length or for clarity. We will not accept questions that include personal attacks, unsubstantiated allegations, vulgar language or libelous statements.

Please note that Joshua's answers are purely informational and should in no way replace consultation with a professional. We will do our best to pose all allowable questions today.

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Hello everyone. Great to be back!

Josh

PEANUT 1988: I was hoping to get some information around how to support my husband who is experiencing depression and is unwilling to name it and seek support himself. This past year was challenging and due to his depression he felt he could no longer continue to go to work and so he quit, which was such a hard factor for me to deal with. I struggle with supporting him yet at the same time not blaming him for the outcomes of his decisions.

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Hi Peanut. Yes, that's a sad and common situation where women are married to men who are either in denial about their depression or refuse to get help. Terry Real's book, *I Don't Want to Talk About It*, maybe of some support. I don't think that you have to get him to admit that he has depression per se because many men feel like it's a sign of weakness. So better to put it in the context of the marriage and see if he'll go to couple's therapy with you (so you can have the couple's therapist name it). You could say that you're concerned about him but also concerned about how the marriage is going and you want him to go with you. Don't be afraid to be firm about it.

JBK: I have dealt with depression for over a decade. Now however, it seems to come with a large amount of apathy. This is causing a great deal of grief for my wife. What can I do to get rid of the apathy?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Hi JBK. Sorry to hear that you're struggling with depression and that it has escalated into apathy. That's not an uncommon reaction

to depression, especially these days with the pandemic enforcing more social isolation than normal. The main question is whether or not you're doing everything to manage your depression such as getting enough sleep, exercise, therapy, social support, and medication. Depression often requires a full-frontal assault so leaving out any of those can cause problems. Apathy can make everything seem harder but sometimes we have to force ourselves to do things we don't want to do in order to get out of a rut. If your wife is upset, perhaps you should have her go with you to a therapy session so she can get help and support as well around this.

ANONYMOUS: I often feel regretful to speak to my partner about actions or habits that make me feel dismissed. He will over react, turn the conversation into an entire criticism. Never listens to what I say and turns my words against me. I often feel confused, guilty, shamed, anxious, and like I am in a mind game. I do not know what to do about this. Are there any approaches that could be recommended?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: That sounds difficult. The main thing to be sure about is phrasing your complaint in a way that doesn't sound like a criticism. Use "I messages" such as "When you come home late and don't tell me you'll be late I feel hurt" rather than "You're so self-centered and irresponsible." It may also be helpful to do a complaint sandwich where you start with praise, then do the complaint as stated above, then end with a compliment. You could also try helping him pay attention to the complaint by giving it a number of importance from 1-10 so he can know whether it's a mild or serious one. So you might say, "On a scale of 1-10 this is a 2, but when you don't clean up after dinner when you've

agreed that you will, I feel annoyed.” On the other hand, maybe you’re with someone really fragile who can’t take any responsibility or critical feedback. If that’s the case you might want to pursue couple’s therapy.

CM: a couple of months ago, my spouse told me that he ‘loves me’ but is no longer ‘in love with me’ and now wants to separate. I am an emotional wreck, as I did not see this coming, nor is this the way I feel. He will be moving out soon. I can’t get over the emotional pain of those words, and have daily meltdowns and anxiety attacks, worrying about the future, and wondering HOW I will get through this? I am in denial, begging him to attend marriage counselling, but he refuses. How do I get through this?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Very sorry. It’s always hard when someone wants to end a marriage especially when they do so without warning. But, I’d stop begging him for marriage counseling. If you’ve asked and he’s refused you shouldn’t throw good energy after bad. It sounds like you have beliefs about your ability to survive this that are making it harder: “How will I survive? How do I get through this?” Those are common but are likely making you feel worse. It’s better to remind yourself that a lot of people lose those they love and go on to love again. That as painful as it is, it won’t destroy you even if it feels like it will. Make sure you’re getting plenty of support from those who care about you since they can help you to feel like you still deserve to be loved.

M: I suffer from anxiety and always reach out to my partner whenever I need to feel reassured. How can I find comfort within myself, instead of draining my partner with the same constant doubts as this is affecting our relationship.

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: HI M. Wanting reassurance and soothing is a common symptom of those who suffer from anxiety. However, it’s not only problematic for your relationship as you’re discovering, it will actually make your anxiety last longer. That’s because it will make you overly reliant on him as your source of soothing rather than yourself. What to do? Here are some suggestions. Download a “thought record” from one of the many sites online. There you’ll learn how to keep track of your problematic thoughts that are creating anxiety and how to counter them when they arise. In general, you want

to face head-on the events that are creating the anxiety: ask yourself “What’s the worst that can happen? What’s the likelihood of it occurring? If it did in the past how did I survive it then?” Also, pay attention to other sources of anxiety such as insufficient sleep and lack of exercise. If these methods don’t work, work with a “cognitive-behavioral therapist” to help you master your anxiety.

ANONYMOUS123: Hi Dr. Joshua Coleman - Any experience or pointers with folks in a relationship who feel that the other person will just not ever be able to understand them? I came from a background of very conservative religion foundations and have since departed that, but have felt in my relationship that my partner who doesn’t have a similar background or experience “will never understand me” and then it can create a barrier? I’m learning that you don’t need to have the exact same experiences to have empathy, but at times still struggle with holding some things in because “they just won’t get it, they didn’t experience that.” Thanks!

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: I suspect the main issue is that you’re holding things back out of a fear that he or she won’t get it. And perhaps they won’t. But if they don’t, is that so terrible? We all have experiences in life that our spouses may never fully understand because of culture, religion, but also gender, childhood experiences, etc. On the other hand, ask yourself “what is it about these experiences that I want my partner to understand? What does it say about me? Why is it important?” He or she doesn’t have to share your culture in order to understand, even if they don’t have the same base of experience as you. But you want to give them a chance to know you more fully.

WFH: Are breaks healthy for relationships? My partner and I have been noticing a build up of emotions and tension due to the situation created by covid. I am wondering if moving out for a short amount of time would hurt or help?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: It could help as long as neither of you is using it as a pretext for breaking up. Many couples feel taxed by the over-exposure caused by Covid. A little too much of a good thing (or a bad thing depending on how it’s going). So, as long as you both are clear about the motivations and that there are clear

ground rules about behavior during separation it could be helpful.

J: What is a good way to tell my partner that sometimes I don't want to spend time with his friends/family. OR even make a suggestion if his family can plan in advance so we no longer run into issues such as: e.g. during the holidays I always get anxious, and stressed out because I am a planner and his family isn't. I have plans made in advance but his family tends to plan get togethers last minute. There has been many times where his family planned things on the same day as my family. Therefore we have to split our time between both families and his family always makes passive aggressive remarks about us not spending time with family, we don't care about them.)

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: You probably have to get more immune to his family's passive-aggressive remarks about your not being available for last-minute get-togethers. It's not reasonable for them or your partner to assume that you'd either cancel or split family time that you have planned in advance. That said, I'd be apologetic but firm to him and his family when this happens. You might say, "Oh, sorry. I told (partner's name) that my family was coming and that if he or you wanted to get together that this was on the books. Next time just let me know in advance and I'll make sure that doesn't happen." If they say "Well, we don't do it like that." You could say, "I understand, but I'm different that way."

SW: I have a soon to be two year old and the past two years have been a huge adjustment to motherhood. My husband and I both work, and when I was on maternity leave I took on more of the parenting load than he did (letting him have his sleep etc...). Now that I am working, I have built up some resentment based on the fact that now I am working and I still have the same workload (my own job and being a mom). I have talked to him about it and he just thinks I need to "chill out" and stop resenting him since he was struggling as well in the beginning and needed to be rested for his job (he had just started a new one when our son was born, just a few months past probation). There are moments where I feel like just crying all the time, I don't know how else to express my feelings and at the same time, when I realize I feel this way I also feel like I am failing to be an adequate wife

and mother. I'm not sure how to navigate this, on top, it has been hard with the pandemic since we can't have any sense of "normalcy" to see friends and family to help unwind.

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Hi SW. Studies show that couples experience a big decline in marital satisfaction with the birth of a child and it's in part for the reasons that you've outlined. When your husband says you need to chill is he just trying to get out of sharing the workload with you or is he pointing to the fact that your standards for yourself as a wife or mother are too high? I ask because studies show that when new moms have high expectations of their husbands about how the house should look and how the children should be raised, men tend to withdraw more. In addition, men are more motivated to do a fair share (well, some version of that) if they're not feeling criticized by their wives. Either way, especially with Covid, try not to hold yourself to too high of a standard as a wife or mother.

On the other hand, you might have to get him to go to couple's therapy with you if you're feeling too resentful because marriages can end if these dynamics aren't addressed.

ABC: Hi, I have a problem being assertive about what I want. I ruminate often and have a lot of thoughts throughout my days and am careful about my interaction with others. I second-guess my actions because I don't want to offend others, but get quite frustrated about tiptoeing around as I'm not being myself. I have a hard time striking a balance between being a part of the collective (i.e. being mindful of others) and being an individual. I struggle to express what I'm feeling; I'm often unaware that I am feeling a certain way and struggle to voice/express myself. My relationships often are affected by this internal struggle. Do you have any recommendations?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: It sounds like you have social anxiety which is characterized by excessive thoughts about the opinions of others, second-guessing oneself, and replaying events from the past out of fear that you shamed, embarrassed, or humiliated yourself. The general treatment recommendation for all forms of anxiety is to go toward it rather than away from it. This is because anxiety is a warning that something terrible will befall

us. The problem is we can never learn that it won't befall us if we avoid doing the things we're afraid of. I would recommend getting into short-term therapy with a cognitive-behavioral therapist to work on the social anxiety.

WILD ROSE: I am dealing with a colleague who uses very accusatory and blaming language when I disagree with her. She seems to see everything as a fight and immediately goes into attack mode. It makes me afraid to provide my opinion and I sometimes feel anxious about even opening my inbox because I never know when she will erupt. I understand that we are all stressed and on edge during the pandemic, but this behaviour has negative impacts on the whole team. My supervisor has told me that she doesn't know what to do about this inappropriate behaviour. What should we individually and as a team do?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Your supervisor has the most power to get her to behave more appropriately. However, she sounds like someone who is psychologically very fragile and is constantly reading negativity in the communications from others. Sometimes those with a psychology like that respond best to the parenting motto of "catch them doing something right," which means offering a lot of praise when she does things that you like or need. In addition, if you have to provide critical feedback start and end with a compliment. Or let her know that on a scale of 1-10 it's not a big deal (unless of course, it is). You could also give her direct feedback by saying something like, "Seems like you're hearing this as a criticism from me rather than a request. Is there a better way for me to give you feedback that doesn't trigger that feeling in you?"

ANONYMOUS3456: What are the main signs of a declining relationship?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Marital researcher John Gottman said to beware of the "Four horsemen of the Apocalypse" 1) criticism 2) contempt 3) defensiveness and 4) stonewalling. Most marriages have all of those from time to time but when they dominate the relationship it's in trouble. Especially if there is ongoing contempt. Another danger sign is the "pursuer-distancer" dynamic where one partner is constantly pursuing the other for more time and closeness and the other is

pushing away. However, if you're worried, you should see a good couple's therapist because sometimes things seem less hopeless than they really are.

HOWARD: Do you subscribe to the common suggestion that relationship problems are shared 50/50 between partners? That is, if one person is being blamed for chronic poor treatment of the other, is the "victim" equally to blame for not communicating or standing up for themselves to demand proper treatment?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Not exactly. Some people are involved with partners who are more troubled than they are. They may have problems with addiction, untreated mental illness or other problems that make being in a couple difficult. But, if you're involved with someone like that and they refuse to change then it is on you to decide whether to stay or leave.

JD: The New York Times article describes feeling blah during the pandemic it's called languishing. NYT recent article The other side of languishing is flourishing and states seven steps to get you thriving again. From pandemic to present, I work hard on health and well-being - flourishing. As examples, I balanced lifestyle to have a significant weight loss. Some friends feel pandemic aged them 3 to 5 years while for me maybe 3 months. How should I honor myself and not feel guilty in personal relationships with others who are languishing? Thank you

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: I don't think you're obligated to feel guilty about doing better or feeling better than others. If anything, it will make you more resourceful to provide more support or empathy for them.

PATH FORWARD: My significant other was struggling with anxiety before the pandemic and were regularly having a few glasses of wine each to help her calm down before bed. Over the past year, her anxiety has gotten worse and her drinking has increased to where she's drinking 1-2 bottles of wine each night. She recognizes this as unhealthy and has tried to stop a few times and has stated that every day she hopes she feels like she doesn't need to. Over the last year especially, it's taken a toll on her health (weight gain, hangovers, lack of energy) which has diminished her self-esteem more, and at times it feels very cyclical. I've tried to learn as much as I can about anxiety and alcohol abuse so that I am being

supportive (i.e. not doing or saying something dumb) and creating an environment that's more conducive to success, but I'm starting to get really anxious about her health too with each failed attempt (which I'm sure isn't helping). It's just so painful to watch the vibrant, wonderful person I know and love struggle with this. From my own experience of seeking therapy in college for depression, I think talking to a therapist could be beneficial for her and I've offered to help cut through the red tape of getting in to see one (help find some options for her to choose from, take care of insurance issues, etc), but she's been fairly reluctant because she feels ashamed. Do you have any ideas or what-not-to-dos in talking to someone about seeking help?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Sounds like your significant other is an alcoholic. I would start by your going to Al-Anon which is a support group for those whose family and partners have problems with addiction. It may not be enough to simply tell her that you're concerned. You may have to escalate your language and say that you are very worried about her and insist that she gets help. That she's being self-destructive and it's hard for you to watch it. If she doesn't want to go therapy alone you could agree to go with her for a few sessions. Or she could start going to AA meetings. But you should tell her that it's eventually going to affect the relationship and you want her to address it before it gets there. Because it will.

YO-TANNY-O: My husband and I are in our early 50s. My mother-in-law suffered a mini stroke 2 months ago that affected her vision and ability to read. Then last week my father-in-law unexpectedly and suddenly died of brain hemorrhaging. Their home is almost 2 hours away from ours. My husband is an only child, so he is facing this period of adjustment with my support, but without that of a sibling. He is faced now with driving back and forth to his mother's home every Friday, then returning to us on Mondays. Since his mom can't read, he has had to arrange all of his father's estate settling and cremation. While I am here for him 100%, my fear is that between dealing with paperwork and worrying about his mother's recovery he hasn't had chance to fully process his father's sudden death. My question is, how will his grief manifest over the next while? And how can I help him work through it?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Everyone grieves differently. It may be better for him to put off grieving until his mother's estate is settled. Your being available to talk to him and ask him how he's doing is valuable but don't worry if he doesn't want to address it yet. He will in his own time.

ANONYMOUS: Hi Dr. Joshua Coleman - My Partner and I are very happy and close; however, we haven't been physically intimate in over a year. We both know we need guidance to fix that side of our relationship, but my Partner wants to wait for in-person counseling instead of virtual. Every time I broach the subject sensitively and try to have open communication, my Partner is clearly uncomfortable (shy) and tries to change the subject. Do you have any tips or advice?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: If you're happy and close and your partner is willing to go to couple's therapy when you can go in-person, perhaps it's better to wait until then. However, if your partner refuses to go once you can go in-person then that's a different story. If they don't then you may need to more strongly insist that this is a problem you both need help with, it's not a problem now but you don't want it to become one.

KB: What is the difference between "enabling" and "supporting?" Is there a standard rule/guideline to measure against?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: I assume you're referring to alcohol or drug use since that's typically the context where people talk about enabling. Enabling is where you protect the addict or alcoholic from the natural consequences of their behavior. For example, when a spouse calls the boss the next day to say that the husband or wife is sick rather than hungover. Or when the parents of a teen go out and buy a new car for the kid who wrecked the family car while drunk. Support is saying that you're willing to go to Al-Anon, couple's therapy, or meetings with the person in order to help them get better.

SN: My husband travels a lot of work ~100 days per year and we have always had a trusting relationship. However, a few years ago, I discovered that one of his workmates (and best man at our wedding) had been carrying on an emotional affair while on the road for over a year which he hadn't told me about. His wife was a friend of mine

and when she found out (around the same time as me) she resented both my husband and me for letting it go on. Since then, I've found it very hard to trust him while he's away. Should I not be projecting this distrust on him or should I be wary of his fidelity since he kept his friend's affair a secret from me for so long?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: I don't consider his not telling you that indicative of his not being trustworthy. He may have felt like he needed to protect his friend's confidentiality about his behavior and that seems reasonable. So, unless you have other reasons not to trust him, I would not consider that an act of untrustworthiness on his part.

COVID RISKS AND FAMILY: Anxious about dealing with in laws who want to cuddle baby. They meet people and also have exposure through work and social life. My parents dont have exposure and hence they get to spend time with us. But my in laws dont understand the risk and only see it as unfair treatment to them. We have offered for them to self isolate and come stay with us (no in and out privileges), but that is apparently not possible for them. Not sure how to strike a balance.

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: There probably isn't a balance. They're not being reasonable to expect you to change your standards of safety when you're acting within the stated guidelines. I wouldn't allow yourselves to be guilt-tripped about it. You could be friendly and sympathetic but say, "Sorry, we're just doing what that the guidelines say to do."

MJ: One of the biggest issue in my relationship is if I mention to my partner something I don't like, he is able to remember and change that behavior or action quickly. When he tells me something he doesn't like, it takes forever for me to change or I forget and we are still in the same situation months/years. I was diagnose with ADHD and my therapist said it's one of the reasons why it takes time. Even after telling that to my partner numerous times, he still says he doesn't make sense or it look like you don't care or I don't use my diagnoses for not changing or when he forgets and I snap at him (I try not too but sometimes it happened before I notice it). What can I/we do to eliminate this argument or situation from our relationship?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Yes it could be ADD but

not necessarily. Maybe you feel obligated to say you're willing to change behaviors that you're really not. I would ask yourself how truly motivated you are to address the things he wants you to change. Maybe you're better off saying you're not willing to change them.

It's true that ADD might make you have a harder time with deadlines, being on time, being organized, doing rote activities etc. If those are the kind of behaviors that bother him then I would suggest getting an ADD coach so you can learn various strategies to address it.

C: How do you form a better relationship with a spouse that you separated on bad terms for the child. My child is 13 but still feels the absence of his father these past 2 years. He doesn't make the effort and just gets angry at me when he wants me to stop whatever I'm doing when he decides seeing my son is convenient for him ,

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: You probably need to meet with a mediator to formalize some kind of schedule. Make it clear to your ex that you really want him to have time with your son and think it's better for everyone. However, you also have a schedule that you have to run your life by. That means that sometimes you or your son won't be available at short notice, though of course, if you have nothing else planned then you're happy to accommodate him.

ANDREW: When you're in a relationship (marriage) and the 2 parties feel the other is dealing with undiagnosed mental health issues, where do you start...?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: In general, trying to diagnose your partner will only evoke defensiveness on their part. Better to focus on their behavior and why it's a problem for you. Ask them what you might need to change in order for them to change the behavior that you find problematic.

...: When my partner and I need to talk about big life choices, especially those involving \$, it usually turns into an argument. I have anxiety, so I avoid having difficult conversations until I absolutely have to. And he will avoid asking/starting a conversation because I haven't mentioned the subject since our last disagreement. How can we have real conversations without negative conflict that doesn't accomplish anything?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: It may be that because you're avoiding the conversations, they have too much heat by the time that they come out. If you both recognize this as a problem, perhaps agree to weekly meetings where you talk about whatever is on each other's minds. It may also be helpful for you to dig more deeply into why you are so conflict-avoidant? What's so terrible about his being disappointed or upset? If he gets overly heated, aggressive, or abusive when you argue then you should make that its own discussion. Tell him, "I want to feel free to raise topics with you without worrying about how you're going to react. Is there a way I can do that, that would work better for you? Can we make the agreement that if the conversation is starting to get heated one of us will call a timeout and we'll agree to revisit when we're calmer?"

JJ: There are many different personality types in the world that get together (colors, love languages, Myers-Briggs classifications etc). Are there any show-stopper matches, like being opposites in every category, that doom any chances of success, or are some matches just more work to keep balanced?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Some matches likely require more work. However, the main determinant of success has to do with our capacity to communicate, show empathy, and form attachments. If there are serious deficits in any of those, it can create serious roadblocks to success

WFH: I struggle with often feeling that my partner doesn't put in as much effort as me. I am the planner for trips, I am the decision maker for dinner, the house cleaner, the event organizer, etc. We have had many talks about this and after each conversation he tries for a week or so and then things settle back into the usual routine. How can I level the playing field?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: It's useful to consider whether he makes up for it in other ways? If that's the case, then I might just accept that you're the one who's more likely to do the kinds of activities that you mentioned. However, if it feels like it's always on you, then next time you have the conversation about it and he starts to lag, I would say, "So, you had agreed to take more responsibility for some of these things but I feel like we're slipping back into the old patterns again. I'm sure you don't like being

nagged or reminded by me and I really don't like being in that position. So can I ask you to keep working on this so we don't have to keep re-visiting this topic?" You could also tell him what about it bugs you. Does it make you feel unloved, taken for granted, burdened, neglected? If so, try to let him know when you're calm and not when you're feeling provoked.

ANONYMOUS: My husband and I have 6 children together. We both work full time except thanks to covid I am working from home, homeschooling the children and doing all the extra housework that comes with them being home. My husband is considered essential and does his hours at the office. When he gets home, he walks through the door, the kids are fed, supper is ready and the house is clean so he confines himself to his room saying he had a tough day and I am left to deal with all the children on my own again every evening until bedtime. How do I approach this? I have spoken to him and let him know that I wish sometimes I had a job that when I left, I could go home and rest but I find myself resenting him for being able to open the door and shut everything off when I dealt with so much during the day already!

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: I'm not surprised you're feeling resentful. You both are working full-time except your job is harder because you're having to work and homeschool 6 children. You might have to escalate your language with your husband. I don't mean yell at him but tell him that this is simply not working for you and he needs to participate more fully when he's home. Don't let yourself be talked out of it. Be firm. If he refuses tell him that you want him to go to couple's therapy with you so you can get more help around it.

ANONYMOUS: I find when I'm stressed or anxious, I often take it out on my partner. What is your best advice for how to properly manage your relationships when you are feeling this way?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Remind yourself that you're harming your relationship and yourself by extension. But also dig deeper into why you're doing it. Are you repeating behavior you saw from your parents when you were a child? Do you feel undeserving of love and are tempting fate? You should also give your partner a warning if you feel like your mood is trending in the

direction of being critical or negative. Finally make sure to repair and apologize afterwards.

PURSUER-DISTANCER: How to know whether couples are in a pursuer-distancer relationship? How to spot, based on the behaviors, someone has commitment issues versus someone that takes time to think through where they want to take the relationship?

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: People usually know when they're in a pursuer-distancer relationship because it feels bad to both of them. The pursuer chronically feels rejected and like they're not getting enough while the distancer feels crowded and intruded upon. Someone who says that they want to "take time to think through where they want to take the relationship" sounds like someone who doesn't want one.

DR. JOSHUA COLEMAN: Goodbye everyone. Thank you for all of your great questions! If you want to learn more, visit me at www.drjoshuacoleman.com

LIFESPEAK: *Thank you, Joshua, for sharing your time with us today. We are sorry that we did not have time to take all of the excellent questions that came in. Thanks to all of you for participating! Please join us for our next Ask the Expert web chat!*