

Community Institute for Psychotherapy

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2024-2025 News & Notes



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Increasing Awareness, Increasing Our Options

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

Of the many skills we as parents model and teach our children, some are more obvious and practical: household chores, time management, self-care, and so on. But some important skills are not so clearly recognized or imparted, such as how to cope with disappointment, how to practice self-compassion, and how to choose healthy ways to deal with difficult emotions.

In her article, “What is One of the Greatest Skills to Teach Your Child? How to Pause,” psychotherapist Lisa Kentgen explains, “[W]e develop most of our problematic coping habits at a young age and without knowing it. Responses developed outside of awareness limit our ability to creatively respond to the environment. Learning to pause gives children a greater range of options and helps them to more flexibly respond to any situation.”

Parents, she advises, should help children “develop the capacity to notice what is happening as it is happening. This . . . enables us to be adaptive and gives us a sense of ownership of our lives.”¹

Rather than merely reacting unthinkingly in emotional situations, we can learn to pause, bring awareness to our thoughts and emotions in order to

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better observe and understand them. A key element of this is recognizing what it is we are feeling.

Lisa M. Schab, LCSW, a licensed clinical social worker, is the author of 18 self-help books and workbooks, including her newest book *Put Your Feelings Here: A Creative DBT Journal for Teens with Intense Emotions*. Schab shares several actionable strategies for managing any intense emotion in the moment.

- **Name your feeling.** Be very specific here. I'm feeling angry. I'm really disappointed. I'm worried. I'm embarrassed. I feel humiliated and ashamed.
- **Accept this feeling.** Tell yourself that it's OK to feel whatever emotion arises. "We have a right to experience all of our feelings," Schab said.
- **Express this feeling safely.** This means making sure you're not hurting yourself or anyone else. You might talk or write about this feeling. You might draw, run, sing, dance, or play the piano.
- **Care for yourself.** What do you need in the moment? You might need to cry, take a walk, watch a silly video, or crawl under the covers, she said. Of course, the particular strategy will depend on where you are and how much time you have, but either way, you can find something healthy to soothe yourself with. 2

Similarly, this ability to bring our emotions into full awareness even as we are in the midst of experiencing them is an essential skill in the development of personal resilience. Linda Graham, LMFT, author

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of *Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience*, writes, “This level of awareness helps us clearly see patterns in our thinking that might make us less resilient.

. . . When we can become aware of patterns of thinking that lead us in the direction of less resilience, we can begin to identify choice points where we might actually be able to discern and choose alternative options.”

This ability to see clearly is one of five central traits of resilience identified by Ms. Graham, which include Calm, Clarity, Connection, Competence, and Courage. “Resilience – our [capacity] to engage with and respond to the experiences and challenges of [our] lives with flexibility, competence and efficacy – is one of the hallmarks of ‘healthy’ psychological functioning. . . . Resilience is what allows . . . anyone to roll with the punches of the day or week, learn what lessons they can, find their footing again, and continue on with their lives – more confident and ‘resilient’ for having had the experience.” 3

1 https://www.parent.com/blogs/conversations/2016-what-is-one-of-the-greatest-skills-to-teach-your-child-how-to-pause-amp%3Butm_campaign=cfcf1e82fdEMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2016_11_22&%3Butm_medium=email&%3Butm_source=Parent%20Co.%20Daily&%3Butm_term=0_3f341b94dd-cfcf1e82fd-132146997&utm_source=newsletter_167

2 <https://psychcentral.com/blog/how-to-manage-intense-emotions-in-the-moment#1>

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3 <https://lindagraham-mft.net/resilience/>