

Transcript of Shrink Rap Radio #411 – Mindfulness and Resilience with Linda Graham

David Van Nuys 0:00

With the way things seem to be going in the world that feels like we're going to need to be more and more resilient.

Linda Graham 0:06

That's right.

David Van Nuys 0:07

Now, how did you first become interested in resilience?

Linda Graham 0:12

Well, I've been a psychotherapist for 20 years, and the core of my work with my clients, it was helping them move from the stresses and losses and traumas of their lives, to be able to cope at all, let alone cope skillfully and adaptively and flexibly. So resilience has always been the core of the psychotherapy work, it got a big boost. As I began studying more of the neuroscience and learning how the brain works, and learning how, when we know what experiences to choose to help the brain rewire itself, we can begin to direct the neuroplasticity of our minds. It's called self directed neural plasticity. And when we learned how to do that safely, efficiently, effectively, then we can become far more resilient, far more quickly. So then I got excited to teach my clients about the brain about their brain, they get excited about that. And then also to teach them some of these tools and techniques.

David Van Nuys 1:16

Yes, and I think that's one of the real strengths of your book. It is the way that it integrates psychotherapeutic strategies with Buddhist meditation practices and neuroscience, which is probably how it came to the attention of Matthew Dahlitz, who is a neuropsychologist. So when and how did you become interested in neuroscience, which came first resilience or neuroscience?

Linda Graham 1:42

Personally, I had to know something about resilience to be a good therapist to help my clients move in that direction. But I became interested in neuroscience first studying the neuroscience of relationships. And that came out of an interest in attachment and attachment theory. And it is so basic to how we learn our earliest patterns of coping, and how we develop the structures in the brain that allow us to cope well, through the earliest interactions that we have with our caregivers. So attachment theory, and how some people become securely attached and develop an internal secure base of resilience within themselves. And why other people don't necessarily that was the gateway for me to learn how the interactions among people affect the brain. And then as we learn how the brain works, how we can use that to then sort of retroactively effect how we interact with other people.

David Van Nuys 2:44

Yeah, I agree with you. That's such a hot area right, now the interaction of attachment theory and the brain. And that's something that I'm also very excited about. And seems like it's leading to an important theoretical convergence for the whole field.

Linda Graham 3:02

Exactly.

David Van Nuys 3:03

Well, before we go too much further, since we're going to be talking about resilience quite a bit. How do you define resilience?

Linda Graham 3:12

Well, here's maybe where I can read us a short excerpt from the book Bouncing Back.

David Van Nuys 3:18

Oh, yes, I'd love for my listeners to have a sense of the flavor of your of your book and your writing. So please do so. Thank you.

Linda Graham 3:27

So I say most of us feel internally stressed out by some external stressor every single day, Few of us will get through an entire lifetime without our resilience being seriously challenged by the pain and suffering inherent in the human condition. None of us is immune to being asked to cope with what we never asked for, with what we deeply, deeply do not want. The way we can respond with skill to such unwelcome challenges is resilience. Resilience is the capacity to respond to pressures and tragedies. Quickly, adaptively and effectively, researchers have found that there's no single best or infallible way to cope with difficulties. Being able to adapt our coping to a specific challenge is the skill that allows us to find our footing when we're thrown off balance by the unknown by stress, or by trauma. Responding flexibly can carry us through the ups and downs of our days. In the words of my yoga teacher, Deborah McKnight, Higgins, blessed are they who are flexible, for they shall never be bent out of shape.

David Van Nuys 4:45

I remember being impressed by that passage, actually, when I was reading the book, and I'm glad you chose that one, that that's a good one. It does give people a sense of the flavor of the book, including that little humorous observation from your yoga teacher.

Linda Graham 5:02

Right. So So the way I organize the teaching about resiliency now is through the six C's of coping, I had five in the book, but the more I teach in workshops around this country, the more I now see that there really are six Cs. So if I could just say a word about them,

David Van Nuys 5:20

yeah, take us through those.

Linda Graham 5:21

Okay. So the first is calm. And that's simply being able to manage distress and manage our reactivity, and come back to a natural physiological baseline equilibrium, that is our birthright. And often, we need practices of compassion, or self compassion, to be able to come back to that sense of calm. So being able to respond to struggle, and stress and disappointment and disaster with some care and concern for ourselves. And for other people. Those two calm and compassion lead to clarity. And I teach a lot about mindfulness in the book, being able to see clearly what's happening, and to see clearly our reactions to what's happening. So that we begin to have a choice to catch the moment and make a choice that leads to connecting to resources. And we need to be able to connect to practices that strengthen us, people that strengthen us and places that allow us to regroup and come back out with being more resources and more able to cope. Then those will lead to a sense of competence, a sense of mastery, and empowerment, a sense of sure I can do this. And a sense of courage, being able to face the new or the unknown, or the risky, with a definite momentum of action to be able to do what needs to be done. So those six seeds, calm, compassion, clarity, connected to resources, courage and competence are what I lead people through in the book and in the workshops.

David Van Nuys 7:06

Now you were using five, and then the sixth came in. Was the the sixth one competence?,

Linda Graham 7:13

No. What I added or highlighted more was compassion. Because as I've done more training myself in mindful self-compassion, and understand how we need to be able to pause and notice and care about our own experience, before we just automatically react and cope with something. mindful self-compassion gives us a little break, where we can come back to caring about ourselves, and come into clarity. Again, before we respond, it's what brings us out of our survival responses back into a more open minded, open hearted point of view. So that's why I now highlight it. And as I do that, as I teach that, that's often what people in my workshops will think pick up on the most, because it's a way of addressing the inner critic, or the inner judge. It's a way of actually softening our relationship to ourselves and coming into more self awareness and self acceptance, so that we can act wisely.

David Van Nuys 8:17

Yes, most of us are kind of reflexively compassionate towards others. Certainly, many of us who are interested in this field, tend to be that way. And yet, it does require a kind of mindfulness, as you suggest to catch ourselves when that inner critic starts picking on us,

Linda Graham 8:38

right. So when people find it more easy to activate a sense of care and concern for other people, I have them activate that sense of care and concern for other people, and then simply slip themselves into that stream of caring. And then to become aware of the automatic messages that come up. Well, who do you think you are? You don't really deserve this, This means that you're really weak and vulnerable, to become aware of those messages, and begin to rewire those automatic messages in the brain. And in the book, I talk about conditioning, of course, how the brain learns in the first place, how it

installs its patterns in the brain in the first place. But then I talk about three mechanisms of brain change, new conditioning, which means new experiences that are going to create new learning and new memories in the brain. And reconditioning, which has really only been seen in the scientists scanners in the last five to seven years. But how we can actually use a new positive experience to rewire an old traumatizing memory. So that's very powerful. And then de-conditioning, how we use practices of mindfulness, to more open up into a kind of spacious awareness, where the brain has its own place and space, it's just making associations and connecting that dots on its own. And very often we will come up with a sense of insight, or epiphany, that we hadn't thought of before. And that often becomes new information for us to become more resilient. So when those automatic patterns come up, as they do we operate 80% of the time on our implicit memory. When those automatic patterns come up, we now have ways to work with them differently, creating new patterns, rewiring the old or just going into a space of possibility that allow something new to emerge.

David Van Nuys 10:49

Okay, that's beautifully, beautifully said. Now, is there a genetic component at all to resilience? Are some people just kind of born more resilient than others?

Linda Graham 11:00

Well, there's certainly a genetic component to hardiness, which is one of the factors of resilience, to be able to stick with something to endure, to last to persevere. But the other factors of resilience are learned, our coping strategies are learned from the people around us early on. And then we learned to change them from other people, other teachers, or coaches or partners. And then being flexible, is a capacity within the brain that we want to recover or discover. And the more we can use both mindfulness and resonant relationships with other people who are resilient, the more our own brains will become flexible. So I often say, because it's true, that mindfulness and empathy or compassion aren't two of the most powerful agents of brain change known to science. And it's true partly because they strengthen the functioning of the prefrontal cortex, executive center of functioning in the brain, which is what we use to be resilient. And in fact, in the book, I call it the CEO of resilience. So when we know tools to use to strengthen the functioning of that part of the brain, the brain itself becomes more resilient, and then we become more resilient. So there is a genetic component. There are certainly patterns we learned in our attachment relationships. But those are those are not the end of the story. Given the neural plasticity of the brain when we choose to learn how to use that, then we can choose to learn how to become more resilient no matter what the early conditioning was.