

Marc Brackett: The emotion revolution that I'm trying to create is essentially infusing emotional intelligence into the immune system of our entire country.

Lily Cornell Silver: I'm Lily Cornell Silver, and welcome to the second episode of *Mind Wide Open*, my mental health focused interview series. Today I am talking to Marc Brackett, who is the founder and director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. He is a professor in the Child Study Center at Yale University and author of the book *Permission to Feel*. He also developed a social-emotional intelligence curriculum which is in place in over 2,000 American schools, which is called Ruler. He's a world leader in the field of social-emotional learning, and he brings brilliant insight into understanding our emotions and how to use them wisely. I am so excited to get to talk to him today and excited for you all to hear what he has to say, so thank you so much for tuning in.

Thank you so much for joining me, Marc.

Marc Brackett: It's my pleasure.

Lily Cornell Silver: It's lovely to have you here. So how I would typically start an interview or any conversation I'm having in day-to-day life is to ask somebody how are you, and you start your book, *Permission to Feel*, by highlighting how important it is to answer that question genuinely, and you also highlight how often we tend to gloss over that question in society and not really expect a real answer, even if you're the one asking the question. So how are you really? I would love to start the conversation by asking you, by taking a page from your book, literally, and asking you how are you really.

Marc Brackett: Today I'm actually a mess. I'm better now that I'm doing this 'cause I'm more focused, but I've had back-to-back meetings, so my brain is, you know, it's like all over the place. I'm giving myself the permission to be present right now.

Lily Cornell Silver: Absolutely. I appreciate that. And I feel like that makes for us to be able to have a more honest and open conversation just to know, like, that's the page we're on right now, and that's totally fine.

Marc Brackett: But how are you feeling, by the way?

Lily Cornell Silver: I'm a little bit frazzled, but I'm good. I mean, this is my second interview ever, so it's exciting, it's nerve-racking, it's very new. Being someone who's predisposed to having anxiety, doing anything new always brings up that challenge, but overall doing well.

Marc Brackett: We're two people 30 years apart, both with anxiety for different reasons. It should be perfect _____.

Lily Cornell Silver: Why do you think as a society we gloss over that question how are you so often?

Marc Brackett: You know, I think it's because we don't necessarily have the skills in parents in particular to handle what you might hear. And so I think what happens is that we get used to fine, okay, whatever, or busy, and then we move on with our lives and we never really get to know how each other is feeling. 'Cause think about it, you know, ask me how I'm feeling.

Lily Cornell Silver: How are you feeling?

Marc Brackett: And if you're my mom, imagine I said, you know, oh my God, I'm feeling anxious, overwhelmed and scared and – and, like, hopeless. Right. You see it's like oh my goodness, like what do I do with that information. So if the adults who are raising us don't know what to do with it, they kinda don't wanna ask it really.

Lily Cornell Silver: And as a child, you're less inclined to share that information if you know that they're not necessarily gonna be – they're not equipped to be supportive or helpful.

Marc Brackett: Or if they haven't modeled it.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah, absolutely. You are a professor in the Child Study Center at Yale University and you also developed the program Ruler, which is the social-emotional learning – I mean, I'm telling you this, but I'm telling the audience – the social and emotional learning program that's implemented in many schools, including public schools in Seattle. I didn't go through it personally, but I'm sure I know many people that did. What do you believe is the importance of teaching emotional intelligence from such a young age throughout all the years of schooling?

Marc Brackett: Well, going back to your opening question about, you know, how are you feeling, like, when you're asked that question, you have to be able to answer it authentically, honestly, accurately. So you know, I will argue that it is a human right to be able to articulate your inner experience. And that if we don't provide people with that granularity, that language to describe what they're feeling, then we're closing off, you know, the opportunity to connect genuinely and to get our needs met and to have a full life.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah, I completely agree with that. And I mean, my experience, I went through a program – we talked about this – called Roots of Empathy, which was different and was only one year, but one of the things that they emphasized so often was empathy and, like you were saying, when someone tells you how they're feeling, to be able to be emotionally equipped to take that in and respond to them in a way that is helpful. So as you discussed in your book, *Permission to Feel*, you experienced sexual and physical abuse from a very young age. I experienced emotional abuse from a very young age. And you write that through these experiences, you were taught directly and indirectly by parental figures or adults in your life to bottle those feelings.

And in my experience with emotional abuse, that was definitely a survival tactic for me, to bottle feelings in order to make it through abusive situations so that I wasn't decompensating and so that I wasn't showing emotions because I think so often in our society showing emotion is equated to weakness and, you know, in an abuser situation, showing emotions can often leave you vulnerable to further attack. So could you talk a little bit more about your experience bottling feelings and how that manifested for you?

Marc Brackett: Yeah, I hope you have, like, three weeks.

Lily Cornell Silver: If you wanna really get in-depth, read the book, *Permission to Feel*.

Marc Brackett: Yeah, I didn't wanna pour out everything about my life in the book 'cause it – the book wasn't really about my story so much as it was to help other people learn the skills. You know, I grew up in northern New Jersey to two parents who loved me. They just didn't have a lotta resources – financial resources nor emotional resources. Sadly, we had a pedophile on the block who abused me for many years, and it was a very manipulative kind of situation and, you

know, I was friends with his children, and they would lure me into the house and, you know, all these terrible things would happen.

And you know, my parents, while I say they love me, they just didn't – they weren't – you know, my mother was going through her own emotional development, you know, and my father too. And you know, they both had their own kind of crazy childhoods. My mother had a lot of anxiety and was worrying about herself and my other brothers who had challenges. You know, she wasn't – you know, I wasn't, like, ooh, I wanna go talk to my mommy about my feelings 'cause mommy's, like, all over the place with her feelings so, like, she can't handle hers so, you know, she's probably not gonna be able to handle mine. And I think that children figure that out very early. And my father, who also, again, I know loved me dearly, you know, he had this, like, toughen up kinda mindset, you know, and he was a tough guy from the Bronx in New York City, and so his – you know, he just – he wasn't interested in feelings.

Lily Cornell Silver: Which I think is pretty common if you're looking at gender as a binary as well is male-identifying people being taught – and I don't know if you experienced this as well – male-identifying people being taught to bottle emotions more so than female-identifying people.

Marc Brackett: Especially, like, sad, weak, you know, "weak" families. You know, if you're a guy and celebrating success at a football game, you know, there's no problem with that. It's when you lose the game and you feel shame and embarrassment. That's – no, no, I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine. And so anyway, it was troubling, it was difficult. And as you know from reading my book, I was blessed to have an uncle who was different, who was, you know, into feelings and wasn't afraid of my experiences. And so I was blessed to be able to have someone like that to talk to about my feelings, and of course I dedicate my book to him because I assert that he gave me the permission to feel.

Lily Cornell Silver: That idea of having a safe person as a child especially, as a person that's an adult who can model for you what emotional intelligence looks like. My safe person my whole life has absolutely been my mom, who's modeled to me it's okay to have your feelings. There's not weakness in crying; there's strength in crying, and you have to feel it to heal it. You know, you have to move through things in order to come fully into yourself. What would you recommend to

someone, maybe younger people watching this who don't feel that they have that safe person in their life or that safe adult in their life?

Marc Brackett: Yeah, it really depends on their age, you know, because it's hard to seek that person out when you're three, four, five, six, seven years old, right. And that's why I feel so strongly that all adults get training in emotional intelligence because then there'll be no kid left behind in this space. You know, when you're older, you're in middle school, right, you can start, obviously friendships are helpful. If you have an aunt or an uncle or a coach in a sports team, but it's hard. And you know, that's why I feel so strongly that, like, kids are not supposed to raise themselves. Like, that's not the way it works.

Lily Cornell Silver: You shouldn't have to be the adults in a parent-child relationship. Yeah.

Marc Brackett: No. It's about we, the people who are raising and teaching kids, creating the environment for kids to grow up in a healthy way. I feel like it's a moral obligation to create spaces for kids to grow up being their true feeling selves.

Lily Cornell Silver: And that was definitely – I mean, you bring up, like, teaching all adults, not just parents, you know, about emotional intelligence, and I think teachers as well is such a huge part of that. I mean, I've had many teachers in my life that – that were incredibly helpful for me in terms of emotional intelligence and were safe places for me and noticed in school when I was struggling, you know, not academically but emotionally when I was having a hard time showing up in class. But something that I experienced within the school system was a discomfort around the emotions that come with trauma and grief especially, and I think that has to do with the greater underlying fear of grief that that our society holds.

I lost a dear friend when we were in our sophomore year to suicide, a classmate of mine, and the way that the school handled it was to get grief counselors in for probably five days, and then all traces of it ever happening disappeared after that week. So we came back to school on that Monday, there were grief counselors, there were people supporting us, kind of a crisis mode, like if you need to leave class, go ahead and leave class. The next week, it was literally as if nothing had ever happened. The teachers didn't speak of it,

the administration didn't speak of it, and us who were his close friends were actually told don't talk about it in front of the other students 'cause I went to a 6th through 12th grade school, and we were told, like, this may trigger younger kids, this may, you know, make someone think that they'll be glorified if they do take their lives because they're too young to understand. And while I understand the value in not triggering or, you know, spreading misconception about what suicide is, it was directly harmful to us as his friends who were really told, like, this is not a space for you to grieve. I think that that emotional intelligence component should absolutely extend to, like, what do you do in these situations of grief and trauma.

Marc Brackett:

Completely. You know, I think what you're saying is like a lotta things. The first is that, you know, when bad things happen, we don't talk about 'em, which is the worst message you can give anybody. The second is that, you know, we can compartmentalize. You know, that's your friendship and, you know, that happened, but now we're in academics. That's not the way our brains operate. Like, we don't do that. Maybe as an adult at 50 years old, I can, like, if I have an experience that's painful, I can, like, put it in the parking lot for a little while and then go to do work and then come back to it. You can't expect that of children.

The same thing happened, by the way, here in Connecticut when we had our horrific murders in Sandy Hook. We got calls from superintendents and principals, like, what should we do about it, do we talk about it. And essentially what people said, well, we're gonna wait for the – you know, just to see if the kids ask questions. I'm, like, what? Like, they're watching the news, their parents are talking about this at home. This is, like, a major, major crisis. If the messages are, you know, when bad things happen, we don't talk about them, it's the absolute worst thing that we can do to help kids grieve, to help build awareness, to build relationships. In schools, my whole fight has been in education to move away from quick fix assemblies, workshops, you know, flavors of the month.

You know, bullying is the same thing. It's like we did this bullying workshop. Okay, there's not gonna be any more bullying. I'm, like, not gonna happen. That's why I really think taking a systemic approach, which means that we have a government and, you know, we're not gonna talk about that today –

Lily Cornell Silver: Different series.

Marc Brackett: Different interview. Like, role models. Do we have role models in our nation for healthy emotion management? Definitely not. You know, at a state level, what's the culture in our state, what's the culture in our community, what's the culture in our school and our homes. And so the emotion revolution that I'm trying to create is essentially infusing emotional intelligence into the immune system of our entire country.

Lily Cornell Silver: That, I think – I mean, just in my own experiences, I think that that would have created such a huge change for me in my own life, and I can't imagine if that were to happen systemically just how much more understanding we would be of each other, how much less, you know, hate, oppression there would be.

Marc Brackett: It's uncomfortable to talk about this, but when you, you know, think about the recent murder of George Floyd and you think about the tapes that we've all witnessed and you think about what this poor man was saying over and over again and how he was in a position of disempowerment and yet still there's an adult – a group of people that allow – it's like I can't fathom, like, what was going on in the brains of these people to not have empathy, to not try other methods for restraining. And so there's so many layers to this work, but I'm still, you know, devastated by that, mostly because we lost a life and also, like, how did we get to a place where people don't listen and don't strategize and, you know, have other ways of interacting. It just – it's crazy. And that's just one example of so many.

Lily Cornell Silver: I mean, I know it's a lifelong process, but how would you recommend one goes about the process of unlearning unhealthy mental and emotional patterns?

Marc Brackett: This is like another therapy.

Lily Cornell Silver: I'm hitting you with, like, the really hard questions. Thank you for rolling with them.

Marc Brackett: And I just had coffee. I should have had a vodka. I think the first step is just understanding this principle that I talk about in my book called permission to feel. Like, let's just give ourselves and everyone else, the people we love, and even the people we don't love, right, let's give everyone the permission to feel, to be their true

feeling selves, no judgment. And let's also recognize that there's no such thing as a bad feeling. Like, emotions are experiences. They're not things to be judged, but we have come in with this judgment, like we spoke about earlier, that anxiety's bad, you know, despair is bad, fear is bad, happy is good. I do these exercises in my training where I show a facial expression. I'll try it right now with you. Are you ready?

Lily Cornell Silver: Yes.

Marc Brackett: All right. Okay, how am I feeling?

Lily Cornell Silver: I would say content.

Marc Brackett: All right, well, you get an A+. So that – I do that same exact thing. I just did it for a leadership training today. Somebody said annoyed, dismissed, whatever. A few people said content. And what happens is that, for a lot of us, we are attributing emotion to people. You know, I have an aunt that's like that. She used to call me and say, like, what's wrong? I'm, like, you. I was fine before you called, and thank you for projecting onto me. So again, permission to feel, no good or bad emotions. Become an emotion scientist, not an emotion judge. And then make it a lifelong commitment to develop the skills. I'm convinced that we are programmed to have negative self-views, and that is done by adults who are raising us and other things in our environment – TV – where we learn to not like ourselves over time. You're too fat, you're too skinny, you're too tall, you're too short, you're too dark, you're too light, your nose is too big, your nose is too small, and the list goes on. You're too feminine, you're too masculine. As kids hearing that, we start believing that all those things are bad. We rehearse it over and over and over again, and then we grow up, right, having really negative self-views. And my argument to our world, to our education system and to families is how much effort are we putting into supporting children and adults in becoming those compassionate emotion scientists for themselves and for others so that you notice those patterns and you start working on them really early. Because like you said earlier, you just can't learn new strategies. You have to unlearn the ones that aren't working for you.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yeah, exactly.

Marc Brackett: And so my big thing is we have to learn how to engage in more positive self-talk and another kinda fancy strategy which we call reappraisal, which is just learning how to put another spin on it. Like, just trying to be, like, really creative and say, wait, there's gotta be another way to look at this. You start believing the reality that someone else created for you. Maybe I am, you know, a loser. Maybe I am not good enough. But how much – we spend so much time rehearsing that but so little time questioning that. Like, wait a minute, who are you to define my reality for me?

Lily Cornell Silver: And you said this when we spoke the other day, that in order for you to be comfortable all the time and, like, feel emotionally good all the time, the world would have to know way too much about you. And that, like, hit me over the head 'cause I think that's so true. I know what my triggers are, but I can go through life trying to avoid that, you know, and that's not – I don't think that should be the ultimate goal. It's about processing and assimilating those triggers, and when they happen, being able to, as you were saying, handle yourself.

Marc Brackett: It's a both and always in the world, right. So I'm a gay guy, I'm Jewish, I was abused, I was bullied. Like, I got some baggage, you know. That's not really baggage, but I had baggage in terms of, like, its impact and the way we're treated because of it. Now, if I had to go through life telling everybody I know, everybody I meet, you know, if I hear an anti-Semitic comment or if I hear a gay joke or if I hear something about bullying, like, you know, kids who are bullied are this, like, I would just be constantly – I wouldn't be able to function. So my point really is that – two things. One is, yes, we have to build resilience in ourselves. And (B) we have to work at the societal level to make things better for everybody. But it's a both and. You can't just expect everybody else to do the hard work and not do it for yourself.

You know, my hope for everyone, right, is that we move away from being in knower mode and move more into listening mode. What I've learned is that the real leader is doing the listening, not the talking. 'Cause the listener is gaining information. The knower is using what they think they know to make assumptions.

Lily Cornell Silver: And I think especially that archetype of the knower is really prevalent amongst children being often told that they don't understand how they're feeling. Somebody else is gonna tell them what they're

feeling, and that's something I experienced a lot as a child is being taught not to trust my own intuition and my own knowledge of how I'm feeling, that someone else is gonna tell me how I'm feeling.

Marc Brackett: It's terrible. Because it distorts your reality, right. It distorts your ability to get the help you need to build trusting relationships, all of which we know are critically important for our healthy development.

Lily Cornell Silver: So to finish off today, I would love to end on a slightly lighter note. Something that is bringing you hope right now.

Marc Brackett: I have been in this field now as a, like, professional for about 20 years, you know, and what I would say is that I finally feel as if people are getting it. And sadly, I think it's taken horrific things for that to happen, but I think that we are a nation that has had multiple pandemics and that people are realizing that if we don't start taking care of people and bonding and having positive relationships and giving people the permission to have their feelings and supporting them and managing them effectively, like, it's just over. You know, emotions are at the core of what that means to be human, and I feel blessed that people are finally getting on what I call the emotions matter bus. And so I don't know if anybody's driving the bus yet. I was talking to somebody, I'm, like, I'm looking for my replacement. I've done it for 20 years, but at least they're not getting in front of the bus anymore. And so I feel just super excited about all the possibilities. We're working on some big projects at my center where we're gonna be potentially training every teacher in the entire state of Connecticut to give them the skills they need to return to school. And those kind of things just bring me just, you know, like wow, like, that's – now we're getting – and having impact, and that's my hope.

Lily Cornell Silver: Cool. That's beautiful. That's good to hear.

Marc Brackett: Firstly, I just wanna say thank you for inviting me on, and super excited to learn about your journey and to see how your emotional intelligence development helps you achieve your dreams.

Lily Cornell Silver: Me too. Thank you so much.

Marc Brackett: And be patient.

Lily Cornell Silver: Yes. Yes. Thank you. Thank you so much for being here and for sharing your insight. I think it's so valuable for young people, for older folks. People are gonna get so much out of that, so thank you so much.

Marc Brackett: Yeah, my pleasure. Thank you.

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