

Promoting Well-Being During a Pandemic and Beyond: How Can Leader Character and CBT Work Together to Foster Wellbeing?

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Late last summer **Dr. Mary Crossan** and I hosted **Dr. Marsha Rothstein** on our podcast, **Question of Character (QOC Episode 11*)**. Our conversation was inspired by an inquiry which had asked if Leader Character had anything to offer a stressed-out student population weary from dealing with a pandemic, job-hunting, social distancing and endless screen time. We thought Marsha had something to offer given her 30 years of clinical psychology in Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) helping her patients address and overcome emotional difficulties. Marsha has also worked closely with Mary on Leader Character, using CBT concepts and practices to successfully enhance leader character development.

Our conversation turned out to be extremely timely, helpful and practical. Not only have I listened to the podcast many times myself, each time gleaning more insight, it has facilitated surprising new growth in me. Marsha's and Mary's conversation has a timeless quality to it and is helpful to all.

I thought the conversation was so important and timely that I have written this brief article to summarize the key insights, concepts and takeaways. Listening to this conversation will likely change your life, probably just a little, but maybe even a lot. I know it's made a difference to me.

There are seven key points that I think are worth your time to consider:

1. **The first step in dealing with emotional difficulties is to be aware of your thoughts and emotions.** In the podcast Marsha recounts the story of a friend who 'lost it' when her computer failed. Automatic negative thought(s) that create downward spirals must be interrupted as quickly as possible before anxiety overwhelms your ability to respond effectively.
2. **Awareness is a lifelong journey, reliant upon strengthening character, in particular the dimensions of Temperance and Humanity.** Awareness is particularly difficult when under duress. Just when we need it is when it seems to disappear. Developing the 'character muscles' of Temperance allows us to create time and space between stimulus and response (in the words of Viktor Frankl) so that we can make a more intentional, intelligent choices that will lead to better judgments and well-being.
3. **Core beliefs are fundamental to how you process your thoughts and your capacity to strengthen your character.** Core beliefs are deeply held, sometimes all-or-nothing beliefs we hold about ourselves, others and the world. They are akin to our 'internal operating software' and so basic that we are barely aware of them. It can be quite beneficial if they are surfaced, especially the 'unhelpful' ones, if we are to healthily process our thoughts and strengthen our character. Some core beliefs can lead to perfectionism, likely instilled in us during childhood, that can over time, become quite unhelpful. Perhaps it worked when we were younger and needed motivation to achieve academic success. In the working world however perfection is unattainable, and a healthy alternative is striving for sustained "excellence". If we cannot make this transition then even excellent, but imperfect work will lead to negative thoughts, emotions, physiology and behaviours, undermining ourselves, our relationships and our judgment.

Identifying unhelpful core beliefs, using dimensions of Leader Character such as Humanity, allows us to learn, grow and strengthen our character.

4. The Anxiety Equation helps you understand the inputs to your anxiety.

$$\text{Anxiety} = \text{Overestimation of Danger} / [\text{Underestimation of Coping} + \text{Resources}]$$

Being aware of the components of anxiety allows you to examine them, to develop alternative perspectives and perhaps arrive at a balanced, more realistic view. With anxiety at least partly quelled you create more time and space to develop and choose better choices with better outcomes and improved well-being for yourself. When seeking resources, crucially important here is the dimension of Collaboration, and the belief that you are NOT alone. If you feel like you are alone then you may wish to re-examine if there is a core belief that is leading you to this conclusion. Challenge that core belief and whether or not it's (i) actually true and (ii) serves you well. And develop the dimension of Collaboration so that you can be someone's else resource when they are anxious, feel in danger and seek your support.

5. **Don't suppress your emotions.** Your emotions are not going away. Recognize them as natural, helpful and an essential component of your humanness. Use them in one of two ways. First as a trigger to become aware of your thinking. And second, to fuel and develop your character dimensions such as Justice, Drive and Humanity.

6. **Marsha's Three Steps:** In conclusion Marsha offered three steps when you are in a negative mood:

- a. Use your emotions as a cue to understand what you are thinking.
- b. Ask yourself: Is there a more balanced way to think about this situation?
- c. Ask yourself: Is there a better way to behave in this moment that would be more helpful?

7. **What are you 'feeding' your body and mind?** What stimuli are you being bombarded with? Being on a screen all day long can be quite trying. Studies show that short breaks, like a quick walk outside, can be enormously beneficial. So, take more active control of the stimulus that your body and mind are exposed to, and make sure there is room for nutritious stimulus.

The bottom line? Leader Character and CBT, working together, can have a huge impact on how you respond to the pressures of everyday life which, as we all know, have been ratcheted up tremendously by the pandemic. You can use the concepts and practices of CBT and Leader Character, established through science and practical application, to take greater control of your thoughts, emotions, beliefs, stimuli and responses. This in turn will lead to better alternatives, judgments, outcomes and well-being for yourself and others. You are not alone and working together will lead to better outcomes and well-being for all.

*** Note:** *This podcast is intended to support all of us who experience stress in our lives especially during this challenging time. For those of us who experience serious emotional distress it should not replace seeking professional intervention.*