

Reflections

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

I hope you and your family have stayed safe and well since I wrote my last article in June. While I do not send out articles in July and August, given the unprecedented, difficult times we have experienced since March, I made an effort to post on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter (all of these platforms are easily accessible via my website) links to (a) articles about coping with the many challenges we face and (b) videos of webinars and interviews I did, most of which focused on nurturing resilience in ourselves, our children, our students, and our staff. For those who have used these links, I hope you have found the articles and videos helpful. A number of the videos may be found on the Video Clips page of my website and on my YouTube Channel (a direct link to the channel may also be found on my website).

We are well aware that the emergence of COVID-19 has produced major disruptions in our lives. My family and I have been more fortunate than other families, especially those who have experienced loved ones contracting or losing their lives to the virus or who have been furloughed or laid off from their jobs and are desperate about having enough money to pay for their rent/mortgage, food, or medicine. It is not surprising that the level of anxiety, depression, and mental health problems continues to rise with little hope of abatement in the near future.

The murder of George Floyd and other Blacks by police officers has added to the palpable tension in our country and world. And let us not forget the upcoming presidential and congressional elections. The inflammatory, vitriolic comments already expressed by certain politicians who question one's loyalty to our country if we disagree with them has led several people to tell me that they wish the elections were already over, anticipating the attacks will only worsen during the next two months. Not surprisingly, they are also very concerned about the outcome of the voting.

I have been collecting numerous articles pertaining to these and similar events, some of which are the ones whose links I have posted on my social media platforms. I have several burgeoning folders filled with writings about the complex issues we face including: the re-opening of schools, whether in-person, remote, or hybrid and the safety

of students and staff; the politicization of measures to combat the spread of the virus such as wearing face masks and social distancing; the ongoing need to confront racial injustice, with many professional athletes and sportscasters taking the lead in voices often choked with emotion and eyes filled with tears; and the attributes of leaders who serve as a force to unify rather than divide people and are most effective in addressing and not minimizing or belittling these complex issues. Each of these topics can easily fill several columns. I decided in this article to offer relatively brief reflections on four themes with the hope that they may serve as a catalyst for further reflection and discussion.

Personal Control and Responsibility

As readers familiar with my writings are aware, “personal control” is a significant concept in my work and one I consider to be an underpinning of resilience. Resilient individuals focus their time and energy on situations over which they have some influence rather than attempting to change things over which they have little, if any, control. In times of great uncertainty, the challenge to adhere to a belief in personal control may seem daunting, but it is even more important to do lest our anxiety intensify. We must remember as Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl reminds us in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, even in the terrifying, dehumanizing conditions of a concentration camp there were prisoners who recognized that the one thing over which they had control, the one thing the Nazis could not take from them, was their attitude and response to events. Frankl poignantly reported that some of the prisoners were able to maintain this attitude in a situation that could easily be labeled as a “hell on earth.”

Later in this article, I discuss what I consider to be the obligations we owe to our family, friends, and community to decrease the likelihood that our behaviors will contribute to the spread of the virus. Two obvious examples are wearing face masks and social distancing. In hearing about personal control, people who contend that it is their constitutional right not to adhere to these practices may argue that their actions fall under the umbrella of personal control, that they are the ones who ultimately decide their attitude and response to what they do or don’t do in response to COVID-19. Years ago I heard similar arguments about smoking in planes or wearing seatbelts in cars. The reason I added the word “responsibility” to this subheading is to convey my belief that there are

principles related to the welfare of others that are invaluable resources to guide and impact the choices we make. More about that later.

Self-Compassion

In my advocating that we strive to adopt an outlook of personal control, I want to ensure that this statement is not interpreted to imply that if we haven't implemented strategies to meet the challenges we face or if the strategies we have attempted have not been effective that somehow we are at fault and that we are not capable of handling the situation successfully. Given my concern about this possible rise of self-judgment, I decided at the beginning of April to include the concept of "self-compassion" in my webinars.

Actually, I first described the importance of self-compassion more than nine years ago in my March, 2011 website article. Dr. Kristin Neff, on the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin and one of the leading researchers and authors on self-compassion, described the concept in the following way: "It's treating yourself with the same type of kind, caring support and understanding that you would show to anyone you cared about." Research indicates that self-compassion reinforces self-care practices, including exercising more often, sticking with a healthy diet, seeing a doctor on a regular basis, and coping with setbacks more productively.

To support the practice of self-compassion, I've emphasized at the beginning of my webinars, especially those directed at parents and teachers, that it's important to have realistic and flexible expectations for ourselves and our children/students/others during these unprecedented times. In my clinical practice I've often witnessed what occurs when the efforts of my patients do not go as planned or hoped; many resort to blaming themselves or others, and in such a scenario the problems persist.

Neff reminds us that "imperfection is an aspect of the shared human experience and that we're not alone in our struggles." Feeling alone and not understood exacerbates pain. Embracing self-compassion during a time of uncertainty and turbulence may be perceived as a Herculean task, but in the absence of self-compassion, our journeys in life will be more perilous, less hopeful, and less successful.

The Impact of Positive Relationships

In several of my recent webinars for schools and school districts, I articulated a belief that I've expressed for many years, well before the current pandemic—namely, that the creation of a positive relationship between student and teacher must be at the forefront of educational goals. This may seem a very obvious goal, but it is one that is sometimes relegated behind other perceived needs. For example, with the increasing dominance of high-stakes testing on the educational landscape, I have heard numerous teachers lament that they would like to get to know their students, but they have less time available to do so given academic requirements. For some educators an unfortunate dichotomy has emerged propelled by the belief that a focus on a student's emotional-social life will divert time from teaching academic subjects. Proponents of social-emotional learning have challenged that belief and demonstrated that time taken to nurture relationships with students serves to enrich learning. As I once heard someone say, "Students don't care what you know until they first know you care."

The goal of "getting to know students" is often easier to accomplish for elementary school teachers who typically have the same students in their class for most if not all of the day. In contrast, middle and high school teachers have different groups of students in each of their classes. Remote learning places one more hurdle in the way of developing more than perfunctory relationships with students, but I believe that these hurdles can be met.

Articles I have read describe various examples of nurturing positive relationships with students such as: building in a remote homeroom check-in each morning, having a teacher or counselor schedule a brief, regular appointment with a student, and encouraging students to provide ongoing feedback about their remote or hybrid learning experiences. It is also important for teachers to be allowed time to check in with each other, not just to share teaching strategies but to offer support, encouragement, and camaraderie during times that can easily produce periods of isolation and loneliness.

The importance of positive relationships for emotional and physical well-being goes far beyond the confines of the school setting. When my son Rich, a small business owner in the Portland, Maine area, interviewed me (please see my May, 2020 article with a link to the interview), we spoke about the importance of Rich's practice of touching base with his staff even for a brief time each morning. I have highlighted that social

distancing is not the same as social isolation, especially given the technology that is available to most of us. The Brooks family, scattered from Maine to California, has had a number of virtual family relationships with another scheduled for this upcoming Sunday—in many ways we are staying in closer contact than prior to the pandemic. Marilyn and I have also had a number of delightful Zoom calls with friends.

Let us all make an effort to stay in touch with family and friends, an action even more imperative when we consider those who live by themselves. In my February, 2018 column I cited Dr. Vivek Murthy, former U.S. Surgeon General. He was quoted in an article in the *Harvard Business Review* about loneliness in the workplace, stating, “During my years caring for patients the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes, it was loneliness.” Murthy observed that loneliness is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety.

We Are Responsible for Each Other

John Donne, the famed British poet, wrote the following often quoted words:

No man is an island entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

I have thought of these words often during the past few months. As noted earlier, I find it unfortunate that the wearing of face masks and social distancing have become so politicized. Although there may have been some mixed messages early on, the medical specialists and scientists are clear that these practices decrease the probability of the virus being spread. However, it is disheartening when people refuse to engage in these behaviors, often arguing as I mentioned earlier, that they are being deprived of their freedoms.

As Americans we are blessed with many freedoms. With freedoms come responsibilities. I was pleased to hear that a number of national chain stores required customers to wear masks when entering their stores. Yet, there were customers who refused to adhere to that policy, leading in one instance to the shooting of a security guard. I know there are those who are not able to wear masks for medical reasons, but that is a small number compared with those who refuse to wear them, believing their constitutional rights are being compromised.

There are also those who do not refer to constitutional rights when refusing to wear masks or social distance. A woman who was not wearing a mask where required to do so asserted in a television interview, “I don’t see the need to wear a mask, I have a strong immune system.” She may have a strong immune system and she may believe that if she contracts the virus she will be asymptomatic. But how safe are the people with whom she will interact in the days that follow? I wondered if she had given any thought to that question or how selfish she was being. I was pleased to learn that several universities have dismissed students for this upcoming semester for not adhering to social distancing requirements. One such example was at Northeastern University in Boston that dismissed 11 students after they violated social distancing measures at the Westin Hotel, which was being used for university housing during the pandemic. They will be permitted to enroll again this January, but Northeastern announced that their tuition for the fall semester will not be returned. To some this may seem like a severe consequence for youthful indiscretions, but I would surmise that the possible rapid spread of the virus on college campuses has certainly played a role in the punishment.

It is not a weakness to wear a mask. Rather it displays a caring for the well-being of others—whether those others are people we know or are strangers. Wise thoughts about this subject were offered by Dr. Michael Sandel, a professor of Government at Harvard University, in an interview conducted by Leigh Wells that appeared an on-line version of *The Harvard Gazette*.

Sandel was asked, “What are the ethical obligations in the middle of a pandemic?” He replied, “Our ethical obligations are, first of all, to minimize the possibility that our behavior will expose others to the risk of contracting the virus. This means wearing masks and social distancing. Beyond this, those of us who are fortunate enough to work from the safety of our homes have a responsibility to support those who take risks on our behalf—not only doctors, nurses, and hospital workers, but delivery workers, grocery store clerks, maintenance workers, child care workers, home health care workers. This support should take the form of public appreciation for such workers, but also tangible, material support, such as health care, paid sick leave, and wage support.”

I would add other groups to this important list, including teachers and school administrators. As the new school year commences, uncertainty is the rule. Different

teaching and learning models have been proposed, keeping in mind the health of both students and staff. Given the rapid changes in the situation, plans often have to be quickly modified, adding to everyone's stress and anxiety. I believe it is essential that the voices of all members of the school community be heard. I know that not everyone will be happy with the decisions that are made, but it is imperative that trust be established and maintained as we navigate through everchanging, choppy waters.

Sandel responded to the question of the role that leaders play during the pandemic, observing, "Trust matters in a pandemic—not only trust in the scientific and medical advice the government provides but trust among citizens. Perhaps the single greatest responsibility of leaders in times of a crisis is to inspire such trust. In this country we've seen how evading responsibility and sowing discord undermines the trust we need to contend with the pandemic."

Concluding Reflections and Questions

I want to end this column by encouraging you to reflect upon questions I have introduced in a number of my recent webinars. They include:

"When the current situation is over, what words do you hope your children will use to describe their experiences during this time and what do you hope they will say they learned from these experiences?" (I add that it is unclear what criteria will be used to judge "over," especially when we are referring not only to the pandemic but to racial injustice as well.)

"When the current situation is over, what words do you hope your children will use to describe how you as a parent (caregiver, teacher) dealt with these challenges?"

"What do you intentionally say and do on a regular basis so that your children are likely to use the words that you hope they will use to describe your actions and their experiences during these challenging times?"

We are in tumultuous times. However, such times can also provide opportunities for all of us to become more empathic, compassionate, responsible, resilient individuals—and for those of us who are raising, caring for, or teaching children, we can also nurture these positive attributes in them.

I plan to share additional thoughts about these and related issues in future articles.

<http://www.drrobertbrooks.com/>