



“Schools are one of those institutions that, with their rhythms and rituals, mark the passing of time and the orderly flowing of civilized living”.

These words that a principal of an Italian high school wrote to his students draw a clear picture of the oddities of current days in Lombardy and other regions of Italy. School, work, social activities, sports, daily chores in public spaces are the ‘normality’ of our lives and they are taken for granted by the majority of us.

The absence of these habits represents a major factor of destabilization for both adults and children, and the never

ending and fast paced exposure to news and social media flowing opinions and memes can make us all feel confused and overwhelmed. It is an understandable, human mechanism to search for an explanation, expect reassurance, find someone responsible, in a word: control. Though, humans are capable of much more than that. With some effort.

Yes, effort, because our brains are designed to kick off a fight or flight response to save our lives at any minimal environmental threat, and when I say environmental I also mean the ‘internal environment’ of our own thoughts, sensations and emotions.

So our body-mind tells us to act and we usually do it in automatic-pilot mode: this is why I am referring to the term ‘effort’, since acting with awareness does not happen spontaneously.

In presence of uncertainty and risk, anxiety is an expectable reaction. Its basic emotion is fear and, as all basic emotions, fear is a useful way our body-mind gives us signals. Fear helps us e.g. follow the guidelines from the authorities, but when it becomes ‘too big’ it turns into anxiety and, at its extreme, into panic, which makes some of us behave in ways that easily spread to other people in what we can call an emotional contagion.

So, the effort that we want to make is that of identifying when our fear goes beyond its use and starts creating more damage to us and the others around us. It is a little like being an acrobat, one that walks on a wire: you need to *feel* the wire and pay close attention to move your feet on it. You need to go slow, to focus on your feet through sensation, to look in front of you with clarity of direction, finding balance and trusting the wire and yourself.

It is a tricky place to move, as there's something called hypervigilation that bring us to overscan our experience looking for signs of something threatening. So again, control. In this situation, hypervigilance makes us look for more information, more opinions, more data, a little like you walked the wire staring at your feet and looking at the ground below: you would easily experience more anxiety and lose your balance.

Mindfulness is a great help for both adults and children in a similar situation, and I am not talking about sitting and meditating all day (unless you want to). Adults who understand the meaning and value of mindfulness, and bring it in their daily lives and interactions, can be a great resource for their children of all ages, as they become a place of resilience and equanimity.

HOW CAN MINDFULNESS HELP?

It can help us stay in presence of uncomfortable emotions without being carried away by them. This has a double pro: first, it limits the automatic pilot responses generated by intense emotions like anxiety, helping everyone acknowledge when the emotion 'crosses the line' and to prevent the escalation to panic. Second, we react to fear in many different ways: minimizing and denial are also some. They serve the purpose to push fear away, as it can be a very uncomfortable emotion to experience. Our body connects it with more threat, and our culturally-shaped minds judge it: fear is dangerous, fear makes you weak, it makes you a coward.

These beliefs can blind us to the point we feel the urge to silent the voice of prudence, a healthy part of our internal dialogue that will make us follow the necessary actions to be taken in the service of prevention. In this situation, it is of utmost importance to trust authorities and follow coordinated guidelines, which is more difficult in an individualistic social background, mostly when guided by the need to avoid fear and uncertainty. Willingness to experience fear and anxiety doesn't mean we get carried away by them and lose our balance.

It is the opposite, we develop an openness to our emotion that brings with it the possibility to notice the stream of thoughts that generate from it and help us de-identifying from them, therefore not acting compulsively and maximizing instead our chances to 'choose'. Emotions come and go, they have their path and duration, but we do *keep* them by our proliferating thoughts.

Usually, thoughts are produced to control the emotion, make sense of it, push it away, solve. These same thoughts that might look wise, are actually the opposite. They amplify the emotion itself and the compulsive actions that follow.

Mindfulness reminds us that the thoughts are not the problem, but what we do with our thoughts.



FOR A WORLD WITHOUT FRONTIERS

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It works on the development of more healthy ways to handle our own thoughts and emotions, for example by acknowledging our urgency to enact our emotions and bring to our awareness the ability to trust the fact that an emotion will rise and fade, if we let it be. When we cultivate this attitude intentionally, we increase our opportunities to make healthy choices even in hard times like this one. We liberate resources and energy from fighting emotions and controlling what we can't control, while acting more wisely in developing resilience and controlling what we can.

HOW IS IT IMPORTANT TO CHILDREN?

Humans are capable of balance, of determination, of resilience. Resilience is defined as 'the rapidity with which we recover from adversity' says neuroscientist Richard Davidson. Adults represent the primary environment of their children, an emotional and relational environment where kids learn about the ways humans can cope with difficult situations and recover from them, primarily through a healthy relationship with their internal world of thoughts and emotions.

An adult that develops willingness in encountering their emotion, acknowledging the urgency to react and cultivating the ability to stay centered, balanced and trustworthy, is an adult that represents a secure area for their children, someone that can welcome the child's emotion just as they welcome theirs, an adult that models healthy coping mechanisms, validates the emotions of others starting from the cultivation of a deep friendship with themselves and their own emotions, through the means of compassion and self-compassion.

- A scared adult becomes a scaring parent.
- A minimizing adult blocks the healthy expression of a child's emotions, thus blocking the possibility for loving containment, experience of validation and opportunities to explore and practice self regulation.
- A mindful parent is one that patiently acknowledges emotions inside and around them, sees judgmental thoughts coming 'you should, you shouldn't' and let them be, let them pass, opens up to other emotions coming, does not struggle in amplifying their emotions or pushing them away, develop openness to uncertainty and does not strive to control. It is a parent that can welcome their child with their emotions and needs, able to connect with them as a first step of all parenting approaches (as Dan Siegel states), capable of warm containment and soothing, in the best place to act coherently and consistently with their parenting values.



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HOW DO I PROTECT MY CHILD?

Many articles have been written and I won't overlap. Quoting one (psychcentral.com):

- 1. Don't Inflate the Risk
- 2. Take Normal, Healthy Precautions
- 3. Avoid Overconsumption of Media
- 4. Use Your Past Coping Skills (and best parenting skills) Also, use age appropriate ways to increase hygiene habits, like games and songs. Divulgate respect and position yourself against discrimination and hate.

And on a final note, embrace this opportunity to live a particular time where the usual rhythms and rituals are not available. We always struggle with the lack of time. Now, we have more time to be together (in most occasions). Observe your children, play with them, ask your teen to help involving them lightly. Stay curious, be creative.

Take good care of your *places*: your house, your city, nature around you, your relationships and your internal space. This will allow you to cultivate the quality of presence with your children, which is what they need the most from you. (see Siegel, The Power of Showing up, 2020).



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