



**T H E**

**C O M E B A C K**

**C L A S S R O O M**

**B Y T I M E L M O R E**

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## Chapter 1:

### Application: An Idea for a Next Step

In January 2021, I sat in Starbucks with a high school senior. Jacob was seeking advice about his future, but he was cautious about the current state of the world. He was keenly aware of the fragile economy, the volatility of the marketplace, and the uncertainty that leaders face today.

When I asked Jacob about his dreams for the future, he looked me in the eye and replied matter-of-factly, “Dr. Tim, I am afraid to dream.”

He wasn’t being melodramatic.

I think this teen was expressing what millions of his peers are feeling right now. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on our world for two years now, and it’s still not fully under control. Just when we seem to get a handle on the virus, new variants surface. According to OneHope’s international survey called “Global Youth Culture,” thirteen- to fifteen-year-old teens said they are experiencing significant negative emotions. Consider some of the US data:

- 63 percent have experienced loneliness in the last three months.
- 56 percent have endured high anxiety in the last three months.
- 45 percent have experienced depression in the last three months.
- 25 percent have had suicidal thoughts in the last three months.
- 7 percent have actually attempted suicide in the last three months.<sup>1</sup>

This is not how life as a teenager has always been, and it is unacceptable.

### Show and Tell

You might be thinking, That sounds terrible, but I don’t think my students are doing that poorly. They seem to be playful and spirited, and they laugh at TikTok videos most of the day. While that may be what you see, that’s often not a genuine display of what’s going on inside of them. They may tell you things are fine, but they likely won’t show you what they’re enduring mentally or emotionally. In fact, what they do and say may actually be coping mechanisms for their anxiety.



Jacob was simply being honest with me in our coffee time. At this point, he believes dreaming about a great career is an exercise in futility. He even brought up the questionable value proposition of college tuition. Is the debt worth it? Any plans or dreams students share with us must have an asterisk next to them. It's all pending the state of our world in the next few years.

I believe there's also a larger obstacle, however, that diminishes their passion.

## **Social Distancing Before the Pandemic**

This may not come as a shocker, but while our world has never been more connected, we're actually more disconnected with one another as well. We were experiencing social distancing long before the coronavirus began to spread. The majority of people around the world cling to their smart phones, and the effect it's had on our relationships is both a blessing and a curse. In fact, the sight of masks was only a reflection of what was occurring internally across the United States and around the industrialized world.

Step back with me to examine the big picture.

Let's begin by looking at American families. A study was released in 2021 called, "The Divided State of Our Unions: Family Formation in Post-Covid America." The study was a joint publication from the Institute for Family Studies (IFS), the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), and the Wheatley Foundation.

According to this research, before the pandemic began, marriage and fertility rates in the United States were already dropping measurably. Last year, the marriage rate fell to 33 per 1,000 of the single population, and the lifetime fertility rate fell to 1.64 per woman. The study said these are "levels never seen before in American history." For more than a decade, we have not had enough babies to replace the current population, and we've now begun to look like Europe and Japan. In short, during the pandemic, marriage and fertility rates reached new lows. I wonder if this is a picture of what's happening on a larger scale. Yuval Levin, director of social, cultural, and constitutional studies at AEI, believes we haven't fully realized the deeper meaning of the pandemic's long-term effects. Throughout history, sociologists described such situations as people curbing their passions for the sake of economics. Today, things look less like ungoverned human desire and more like "an absence of energy and drive that leaves people languishing."<sup>2</sup>

This is my concern.

There is a passivity happening across the ranks—including teens from Generation Z. While we certainly experience some positive trends in culture today, it's important we examine why they are happening. Teen pregnancies are at their lowest rate since the 1930s, but it's likely because the number of teens having sex is down. Date rape is down—but is it because even the number of teens dating is down? There are fewer teen deaths from car accidents today, but that's likely at least in part caused by fewer teenagers getting their driver's licenses. Today's social disorder is not that we have over-active appetites as in times past—it seems instead that we don't have an appetite at all.



Consider how this narrative has infected our culture:

- Living alone is now the fastest growing residential choice. In the United States, the share of people living alone has doubled over the last fifty years.
- Dining alone is on the rise. There are restaurants that have created tables for solo customers who prefer eating by themselves.
- Traveling alone and driving alone is on the rise globally. A growing number of people prefer the decreased hassles of solo travel.
- Working alone is now on the rise, with record numbers of people quitting their jobs and working solo at home.
- Interacting with others alone (through a portable device) is now the preferred choice. People can interface when they want, yet quit and ghost others when desired.

Why are these trends on the rise?

Because life with others is taxing. It is socially and emotionally expensive. While we all crave community, we prefer the ease of doing more things without the hassle of company. Author Robert Putnam spotted this trend more than twenty years ago in his book *Bowling Alone*.

Putnam argued that civic life is collapsing—that Americans aren't joining, as they once did, the groups and clubs that promote trust and cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Sadly, this undermines democracy.

The fact is, both good and bad outcomes occur in our society today, but my concern is that the negative outcomes are coming because we lack passion for life. The divorce rate hit a fifty-year low, but there are likely fewer divorces because there are fewer marriages.<sup>4</sup> According to Wall Street Journal columnist, Peggy Noonan,

*The new passivity is global, and further along in parts of Europe and Asia. "Social inertness," Mr. Levin says, "is a response in part to the breakdown of the traditional social order itself: the waning of 'life scripts' provided by family, religion and traditional norms. Younger Americans are 'less sure of where to step and how to build their lives.' They have probably received, too, an exaggerated sense of the material challenges presented by marriage and parenthood: 'Many younger Americans now think it was much easier than it really was for their parents to live on one income or to have that additional child.'"*<sup>5</sup>

*The fact is, both good and bad outcomes occur in our society today, but my concern is that the negative outcomes are coming because we lack passion for life.*

According to Yuval Levin, we are seeing “a rising generation acutely averse to risk, and so too, every form of dynamism.” Excessive risk aversion that we see in our young is modeled by adults and probably picked up by students as they watch us lead. Risk aversion is deforming other areas of American life, from raising children to work to public leadership. Peggy Noonan believed it is intertwined with a more general tendency toward inhibition and construction—we see this in speech and conduct codes that leave Americans “walking on eggshells around each other in many of our major institutions.” This behavior “stifles the public arena while denying us recourse to private arenas and tells us how not to behave without showing us how to thrive.”<sup>6</sup>

My point? We must make a case for not giving up.

*Do you see any signs of apathy or passivity in your student population?*

## How Do We Do This?

I believe it’s time for a comeback. Our leaders, schools, and students must determine to come back, to bounce back—or dare I say, bounce forward. Risk aversion is no way to live and is certainly not the mindset our students need when they graduate. We’re afraid of making mistakes, being canceled, offending someone—we’re afraid of failing and falling. The pandemic has only increased these fears. Now consider the alternatives.

1. When students experience increasing passivity, they tend to depend on luck. In fact, without healthy ambition, luck or entitlement is all they’ve got. Neither are good bets.
2. When students bounce back, they usually do so by “betting on themselves.” They choose to initiate, to take a first step and do something about their situation.

I am encouraging you to encourage them to choose option two.

## Betting on Themselves

The best way to get students dreaming again is by empowering them to bet on themselves. We must move them from an “external locus of control,” which counts on external forces to enable them to succeed, to an “internal locus of control,” which enables them to take responsibility for their future success. These terms from Dr. Julian Rotter’s scale on external and internal locus of control define what’s occurring; this shift will be a counter-cultural. Author Peter Gray reminded us that since the 1960s, students have become increasingly “external,” depending on someone else or some other outside influence to ensure success.<sup>7</sup>



In short, the data shows that students are betting on someone else.

In 2021, my family took a trip to Las Vegas just for fun. It was fun to see shows, eat well, and laugh a lot. While there, it was easy to see how many people absolutely love to gamble. I was reminded, however, why I do not have an inkling for gambling. This is not a judgment on others, but rather a statement of why I discovered, years ago, that I don't like it—gambling always contains a huge element of chance. It's part skill and part luck. In fact, a lot of luck. Blackjack, slot machines, poker—you name it. Millions crave it. But I don't. Whenever I have a choice to bet on luck or to bet on myself, I always choose myself. It's not out of arrogance or superiority; it's simply about the way my mother and father raised me: Work hard. Display ambition. Take initiative. Bet on your talent and skills rather than luck. I've never bought a lottery ticket, played Powerball, or bet money on a game. It's a mindset.

I believe we must teach students to bet on themselves. This will foster a comeback.

## Eight Ideas to Help Students Bet on Themselves and Make a Comeback

1. Help students dream about outcomes that are in their control. We all feel a bit handicapped by the post-Covid season we're in, so we need to plan and imagine goals about things that we can control and influence, not about things that are out of our control. Once these goals are written down, talking about them and taking steps toward them should enable students to bet on themselves. When we set goals concerning outcomes that we have no control over, it can feel disheartening. And it can paralyze us emotionally.
2. Break down their dreams into manageable “bites.” Often students fail to bounce back or even consider betting on themselves because it's hard for them to see themselves succeeding. The best way to overcome this is to split the big dream into smaller dreams or steps so that you can experience “wins”. With each win, celebrate and begin to change the narrative inside of them. Remember the adage: How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.
3. Hate, jealousy, blame, and revenge are all a complete waste of time. They are handheld grenades. The only person they will explode upon ... is you. So, forgive, forget, and learn. Comebacks are nearly impossible if a person is harboring these four emotional deadweights. They prevent progress and hold people down. You and your students will need to overcome emotional baggage to make a comeback.

*I believe we must teach students to bet on themselves. This will foster a comeback.*

4. Success isn't about scores, stats, or spreadsheets. It's about relationships and people. People—teachers, administrators, coaches, and staff—can make or break a student's spirit and drive. If the educational experience is reduced to tactics, we'll never see students really overcome this difficult season. It's personal connections that make the difference.
5. There is simply no social media platform, pill, medication, or anything else that can replace human connection between caring adults and students. It's absolutely impossible to replicate face-to-face communication. No pharmacy or computer screen can ever fill the need for interaction with others. Make time to enjoy real dialogue and conversations with your students. And make sure your connections leave them encouraged and hopeful.
6. The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled. Plutarch said this centuries ago. We must keep feeding our minds quality things. Instead of merely instructing students, why not make them curious? We can't force anything, but we can make them think. We can teach them how to think. Let's model hope, positivity and faith. What are we doing today to make colleagues, supervisors, and students think this way?
7. Much of the challenge in making a comeback is about our emotions. Emotions make a wonderful servant, but a horrible master. When we are hurt by someone, we tend to take it out on anyone around us. This may sound graphic, but if you don't heal what has hurt you, you'll bleed on someone who didn't cut you. We must deal with past hurts, manage our emotions, and move forward.
8. Finally, one tangible strategy to help students bet on themselves is to bet on them first. Make sure they know you believe in them and are betting on their success by what you say and do—consider the power of your words and actions. This is called the Mirror Effect. Others tend to reflect (like a mirror) what leaders practice. Why not go first?

*Which ideas from this list seem most relevant for you right now?*





I've told Christa's story several times. But it's worth telling again.

Christa was a high school senior when the pandemic hit and we were all sent home. She lost her spring break, senior trip, final prom, and in-person graduation ceremony. She admitted that while this certainly wasn't the end of the world, it did cause her to stop dreaming. That spring, she began battling depression, and her mother grew worried.

One day, she randomly saw a news story on television about her local hospital's need for help. Medical staff were going without meals as they worked around the clock to care for patients who'd been infected by the coronavirus. Suddenly, Christa lit up. Instead of being absorbed by her own losses, she became enraptured by those who were in worse shape than she was. This need nudged her to bounce back and bet on herself. Christa called a young woman who had helped hospital staff in her area and inquired about what steps she took. Then Christa went to work herself. She launched a website page to garner donations. She visited restaurants and grocery stores and asked them to donate food. Then she rounded up a bunch of student volunteers to make meals and deliver them to the hospital. Those teens placed the meals under the curtains or just outside of doors so workers could continue serving patients while they ate.

Everyone won. The staff were fed, the patients were treated, and Christa bounced back.

### Talk It Over

1. Have you spotted this kind of melancholy mindset in any students?
2. What's been your mode of operation to rekindle passion in students?
3. When your students do bet on themselves, what is it that ignites them?
4. What new ideas entered your mind as you read this chapter?



## Chapter 2:

# Learning From Educators and Students Who Bounced Back

To anyone who's wondered why everyone doesn't just get on with life and stop making such a big deal about the trauma of the last two years, let me remind you—we are asking both adults and kids to bounce back. To come back. The whole world went home in the spring of 2020 when we didn't know how dangerous and contagious the coronavirus would be. For months, millions of us were forced to do our life in an entirely different manner. Our routines were turned upside down, so we established new ones. Now as we claw our way out of the pandemic, we're upsetting the newly established routine with another one. We want people to come back, yet to come back to a new normal that's not exactly like it was before.

Brianna Rivera is an articulate student who wrapped her arms around the challenge. Finding herself thrust back into society after quarantine, the high school senior said, "That's a lot for me, after having been in isolation for eighteen months. You want to get back into the swing of things, but there's something kind of holding you back. It's like, you're having to reconcile these three people—the person you were before the pandemic, the person that you were during the lockdown, and the person that you're becoming now."

If we have any hope of building comeback students who are resilient, we must model that same spirit ourselves. Remember—people do what people see. It's the Mirror Effect. They will reflect the kind of leadership we have given them.

How are you demonstrating a comeback spirit?

### The Need of the Hour

I'm not sure what you're observing in your school or district, but we see a trend nationwide. In fact, there are specific trends with first-year students in middle school and high school. Having been learning in isolation much of the last two years, as many as 50 percent of student populations stepped onto their current school campus for the first time this school year. And it's been challenging for them. In a 2021 focus group, each of the teachers and administrators acknowledged that they see a lack of soft skills (interpersonal skills) in the freshmen, as well as lower self-awareness and resistance to participation with their teachers. Below is what educators are saying as they observe these students.



One principal said their students are not as connected to their school as much as past student populations and that their current tenth graders are reverting back to the behaviors and executive functional skills they had one to two years ago. They look like ninth graders. Many of them act more like eighth graders. Parents seem to lack the acumen to lead their children through this stunted growth.

One superintendent reported a high rate of absenteeism and apathy among students. There is a quiet indifference. A high number of students are disengaged in the classroom, and some are even toxic.

Teachers from a number of districts reported students are just not turning in major essay assignments in college writing, to the point that they will fail to pass. Students aren't following directions in both online and in-person classes.

One counselor said students are mad because they feel like everything has been pushed back to normal yet they do not feel back to normal; they complain they had no transition time. Teachers are disappointed in the poor social skills and immaturity of the students. They are more physical fights among students on campus. Students seem to be tapping out on issues that in past years, students had been able to easily overcome.

A high school teacher reported seeing an emotional fragility in students—an inability to handle mistakes and recover from them. In our small school of five hundred, we had five students hospitalized this year for suicidal ideation.

Will Parker, who works for CCOSA, reported in one of our Growing Leaders focus groups, “I’ve noticed some students who wear masks now even when they’re outside and alone. It’s almost become a safe place for them to hide.”

It’s time we examine some models for bouncing back.

*Have you spotted any of these symptoms above in students?*

## **Schools and Educators Who’ve Modeled the Way**

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate what comeback schools and comeback educators look like. At Growing Leaders, we have the privilege of meeting many effective and caring teachers and administrators each year. We meet them as we speak on campuses, as we host webinars and virtual training events, and as we engage focus groups. I’d like to introduce some of them to you and what they did to bounce back this past year. To be clear, when I use the term bounce back, I mean these leaders have recognized a setback on their campuses and they have initiated a move that enabled students to recover from it. In many cases, the educators leveraged the very problem as part of the solution.

The setback became a comeback.

Gary Davison, principal for Lambert High School, reported that support for schools, positive groups, and other clubs that foster community is declining while participation in virtual groups grows quickly. Think of TikTok Challenges such as the following:

- Devious Licks Challenge
- Blackout Challenge
- Slap a Teacher Challenge

This past year, there was a challenge every month. September was Vandalize School Bathrooms, October was Smack a Staff Member, November was Kiss Your Friend's Girlfriend at School—you get the idea. By spring semester, we saw Mess Up School Signs in February and Make a Mess in the Courtyard or Cafeteria in March.

In response, Lambert High School's teachers and student leaders decided to bounce back and turn this challenge on its ear. They met and then issued their own TikTok Challenge that was positive and redemptive instead of destructive. They challenged their students to create and post TikTok challenges that would encourage and help fellow students to focus. Believe it or not, this went viral and now these challenges are everywhere. It's the new talk on campus. The bounce back was all about pointing the students in a new direction. (This Common Sense Media Guide to TikTok was written for parents, but it has plenty of information for teachers too.)

Lambert High School reversed the setback by using TikTok challenges in their favor.

Belinda George is the principal at Homer Drive Elementary School. She noticed her students were disengaging from schoolwork and their reading scores were dropping measurably. After a little research, she discovered this was often happening because kids were being raised by a busy single parent or because both parents were absent due to jobs. No one was reading with those children at night. So, she turned this challenge around by hosting Tucked In Tuesdays. Each Tuesday night, George got on Facebook Live at 7:00 pm and virtually tucked in any student that wanted her to do so. Both George and the participating students put on their pajamas, and then she would read a book to the children. (The book was usually one teachers were encouraging students to read.) She'd point out big ideas, sound out words with them, and offer shoutouts to kids she knew were watching and had read the book. She not only helped kids fall asleep faster but also helped them fall in love with reading. The result? Students engaged, reading scores went up, and the attendance at Tucked In Tuesdays has been outstanding. Although the entire student body is about seven hundred, she's seen more than two thousand students hop online for her reading time. Interestingly, although it was a timely move in light of the pandemic, George actually started this before COVID-19 hit. She was prophetic in anticipating a problem and solution.

Homer Drive Elementary School leveraged technology to serve students in need.



Amanda Foss a social studies teacher at Vision International School noticed a lackadaisical, even apathetic spirit among students on her campus. The pandemic and quarantine had taken its toll on everyone. Instead of imposing her ideas on teens to try and turn things around, she enlisted the students themselves. Her thought process was the following: the school needed special leadership in these troubled times, and the students need to sense more ownership on campus. So, she recruited students to offer that special leadership. In a focus group with our team at Growing Leaders, she reported, “I got the administration on board with beginning a full high school leadership program for every ninth to twelfth class, and it has quickly transformed our school culture and gotten our students to take more initiative than they’ve ever taken before, even in pre-Covid times. It’s really gotten them involved. We got them each to work together to plan service projects for the school and everyone is required to do at least one, but they choose what service project they will do. They all just finished their proposals last week and pitched them to the principals and got them approved. Our students have been highly engaged and wanting even more ownership and opportunities to serve as leaders. It’s been great!” What a great comeback. Amanda Foss put students to work to address the problem.

Before Leslie Smith took her sabbatical, she engineered a program called ROAM, which stands for Revitalize on a Monday. Leslie served as the head of school for Orange Lutheran High School in Orange County, California. This school is amazing. Her students, however, are under a great deal of pressure as they prepare for stellar universities upon graduation. The problem Leslie and school leaders wanted to solve was managing stress and anxiety. So, ROAM is all about taking a pocket of time each Monday to do anything except a task that’s stressful. The school has set up board games to play, places to hang out with friends over coffee, dogs to pet—you name it. The only time it’s okay to do schoolwork during this time is if a student needs to catch up (on a subject) or make up (a test). It’s catch up or make up; otherwise, it’s rest up for the students. Leslie told me that not only does everyone experience lower stress levels, but improved relationships between students, staff, and faculty have risen measurably.

Orange Lutheran High School changed up their routine to meet a relevant need.

Akbar Cook is the principal of Westside High School in Newark, New Jersey. A former division one basketball player, he continues to compete—though now against problems on campus. Each day, Cook stands outside the school, greeting and high-giving students as they enter. (At six foot, seven inches tall, he’s hard to miss.) He noticed over time, however, that fewer students were in attendance. Upon researching the issue, he discovered many students weren’t coming to school because they were being bullied. And many were being bullied because they smelled bad. Yes, you read that correctly. Classmates would make fun of them because they’d wear the same clothes for several days in a row and smelled like dirty clothes. Instead of merely barking out orders to stop bullying, Cook chose a win-win solution. He gutted a room in the school and turned it into a laundromat. He got donations to fill the room with washers, dryers, detergents, and softeners. Then he invited anyone who needed to participate to join him before school each day to wash and dry their clothes. The result? Attendance is up, bullying is down, and students are wearing clean clothes and learning life skills in the process.

What a comeback. Everyone won on the West Side High School campus.

In addition to being a role model, Cook moonlights as his school's basketball coach. At West Side, he uses basketball as a teaching metaphor for life. He said, "I don't call fouls in practice, because when the games come, I want players to know that life ain't easy."<sup>8</sup>

## Components of Comeback Educators, Coaches, and Parents

These comeback leaders reveal some common threads in their leadership. I noticed four themes from the ones I admire the most:

- **They respond to a setback by initiating something different.**

Each of these people have a bias for action. In response to a setback (even when it's a COVID-19 challenge), they turn that setback into something they can use for growth.

- **Their choice isn't about a mere academic goal, but it feels authentic.**

These people also made choices that fostered more than academic progress. While grades are important, their priorities were more holistic and felt genuine to students.

- **They become "real" to students, instead of just mere professionals.**

During the setback, these people came across "real" to everyone they led. They felt and displayed natural fears, joys, and even flaws. There was no pretension or ivory towers.

- **Their new direction solves problems and serves pupils.**

Finally, what these people did in response to a setback ultimately solved a problem for the school or served the pupils in the school. Or it did both. These people are problem-solvers.

*What inspired you most from these stories? Do you know any comeback leaders?*

There is one more discovery I'd like to talk about that's noteworthy. In addition to the list above, the best comeback leaders were all people who continued learning from their students. It sounds cliché, but each of us should continue to learn as we age. A study was performed on people in their "third third" of life; they were over sixty years old and in the final lap of their careers or already retired. This "Study of Adult Development" discovered that those who found the final third of their lives most satisfying learned from their children. Those who only embraced teaching and direction-giving roles found their lives less happy.<sup>9</sup>

In light of this data, below are some of the most vivid messages students have relayed to their teachers, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic.



## Lessons Our Students Can Teach Us

As I've mentioned, the pattern I noticed in comeback administrators, teachers, counselors, coaches, and staff was that they not only taught students but also learned from them. For example, many of the educators confessed their students were more resilient than they were. Educators found inspiration from the kids, who adapted more quickly to the changes forced upon them by the pandemic than they did. I recognize this will sound cliché, but those students shifted to virtual engagement, digital expression on a screen, and remote learning. I took the liberty to extract and summarize the messages that Generation Z students gave us as caring adults:

### **1. You project one message, but students often receive another.**

For instance, busyness is not a badge of honor. You likely come across very busy, if for no other reason than to communicate that you don't have time to waste on a silly conversation. The message students receive is I'm not as valuable as other issues in your day. Further, students learn to imitate us, wearing their busyness as a badge of honor, proud of how occupied they are. This is usually at the expense of their mental health.

### **2. It pays to be aware and observant.**

Students frequently notice details that teachers miss: how someone is feeling, a different coffee mug a teacher uses, how the tone is different today—you name it. Sometimes, those differences can mean something. If we'll pause to observe, it will likely inform our approach to the day. If you don't recognize details well, ask students who do. This can make a difference in how relevant you are in your classroom. Self-awareness is key.

### **3. Laughter lubricates the tension of a day.**

Even in high-stress times—maybe especially in high-stress times—educators need to throw in some well-timed humor to take the edge off and communicate that the demands of the day will not make or break everything in the student's future. Students frequently have over-the-top anxiety regarding a test or a project, which only serves to lower their creativity. Laughter can center everyone again and remind us we are human.

### **4. Ask me questions and listen for subtext.**

As students age, the frequency of teaching via questions should increase. In fact, as kids reach adolescence, most of our teaching should move from explaining to asking great questions. The best teachers in history did this. It fosters self-discovery and ownership on the part of the student. Once you ask a great question, listen well and pay attention to their verbal (words), non-verbal (body language), and paraverbal (tone) messages.



## 5. **Trust must be earned and can be lost quickly.**

This may be the most important lesson that our students teach us. I rarely depend on my title or achievements to gain the ear of students. I try to arrive early to school and begin authentic conversations, swapping stories. My goal is not to impress them but to identify with them. In today's polarized and distrustful world, trust must be built for respect to be given. We earn it through relationship and connection.

## 6. **Unconditional love will boomerang.**

I recognize this is risky to say, but I believe the best educators find appropriate ways to demonstrate they love their students, with no strings attached. A great learning environment is simply one human teaching other humans (often younger ones) through very personal means. The pedagogy includes relationship and love. I have found that if I do this, they're quick to respond with love in return when they learn I am struggling with something. Students learn better from a teacher whom they believe loves them.

What could your comeback story be?

## Talk It Over

1. Have you spotted this kind of melancholy mindset in any students?
2. What's been your mode of operation to rekindle passion in students?
3. When your students do bet on themselves, what is it that ignites them?
4. What new ideas entered your mind as you read this last chapter?





## Chapter 3:

# The Diamond Secret: Preventing Pressure from Becoming Stress

Jana Davidson teaches seventh grade science and tenth grade biology. Every day she observes students entering her classroom stressed out. Many of them feel overwhelmed. Anxiety has become quite common, thanks to the pressures of social media and a pandemic.

When I asked Davidson how she helps her students manage their stress, she told me she assumed the best way is to take the pressure to excel off them. They have so many stressors in their lives already, why add to them by pressuring them to perform better?

It makes sense, until you see the research.

## The Benefit of Pressure

All of us can let stress get us down. But there is a difference between stress and pressure. Dane Jensen is the author of *The Power of Pressure*. He said that stress can be harmful, but pressure is not part of the problem. It's actually the solution. We've all heard the analogy of a coal mine. Coal is one of man's earliest sources of energy. The Chinese were known to have used it more than three thousand years ago. A lump of coal can stay in the coal mine and remain a lump, or it can be extracted and burned to generate heat, or its carbon can be transformed into a diamond with the right amount of pressure. The difference is fourfold—the carbon inside the lump, the intense heat, the pressure against it, and how long it endures under pressure—that creates the outcome. It's the element of carbon that is transformed into a diamond, not the coal itself. It's all about what's inside. This is true about humans as well.

Remember, pressure isn't the problem; it is the solution. The key is knowing how to manage the pressure we feel. All pressurized experiences include three elements:

1. importance—the stakes feel high because the outcome is valuable to you
2. uncertainty—there is no guarantee of the outcome, and it could go either way
3. volume—the intensity and amount of input coming at you that you must process

Pressure will either lead to stress or success. The secret to succeeding involves two decisions on your part. If you choose differently than most people, you will actually benefit from pressure and see it form you into a diamond. The two secrets?

- What you see.
- What you do.

## What Do You See?

Successful people see the pressure as a push forward. People who buckle under the pressure only see the stress it causes them and give up before doing something about it. They see the negative, not the positive. Eighty-two percent of high school students report they have experienced at least one trauma. <sup>10</sup> For millions, it was the COVID-19 pandemic. Trauma works like pressure. Millions of people grew more anxious as a result, but millions of others saw it as an opportunity to do something different. The interruption became an introduction to new opportunities. Like a lump of coal, these people leveraged the pressure to transform them into stronger, resilient people. They eventually found a diamond when they look in the mirror.

Pressure can feel like a push or a shove. It doesn't feel good to be shoved by someone in a crowd. It feels intrusive and violating. But what if we could see that we can be pushed forward, not just pushed down? Imagine you're in line to enter an amusement park and someone bumped into you and pushed you down. The input feels negative, but what if when you got back up, you realized you were pushed closer to the entrance of the park? You're actually in a better place. When life kicks you, let it kick you forward. We must focus on the outcome, not the input. The input feels bad, but what if we were shoved down—but into a better place? Much of what happens is our choice.

*It all depends on how we perceive the situation: is it a push forward or a push downward?*

## What Will You Do?

While they may feel the same, stress and pressure are not the same. The difference is the ability and responsibility you possess to do something. Stress usually happens when we begin to feel overwhelmed or afraid. Our emotions can paralyze us. We might be active, but our activity is all about worry and anxiety. Inside, we feel helpless to do something to beat it.

An example of stress is yelling at the TV when your favorite team is playing. No matter what you do, it doesn't help or hinder. Pressure is when you're playing in that game. Your performance makes a difference in the outcome. It's all about your ability and responsibility. The pressure can actually bring out the best in us because outcomes are within our influence. I believe pressure is the only way to call out what's inside of us. We all need the right amount of it to perform at our best. By taking positive action, we leverage the pressure in our favor.



Dane Jensen posed a question to more than a thousand people: What's the most amount of pressure you've ever experienced? Their answers ranged from elite skating competitions to periods of job uncertainty. One brought up swimming back to shore after being swept out to sea. For several students, a final exam came to mind. So, what enables people to rise to the occasions, instead of buckle under pressure?

*It all depends on the power we believe we possess to do something about the situation.*

My friend Andy took a speech class in college. He was already a very good communicator and pretty much breezed through the class, far ahead of his classmates. That is, until it was time for exams. He gave a good speech, but his teacher Ms. Grayson gave him a B minus. He was crushed because his was the best one in the class—how could he not get an A? He asked Ms. Grayson about it, and she said, “Your speech was good, but I know you can do better. I’ve seen your talent, and I think you gave a good effort but not a great effort.” At first, this made Andy angry. But soon, he realized his teacher was right. This experience stuck with him. From that point on, he used that pressure to excel to “push him forward.” He got an A in the class and now is the best communicator I know. He speaks every week and has written several bestselling books. Thanks to the pressure, he's excelling.

## Getting the Most Out of Pressure

This begs the question, How do we do this? How do we leverage pressure to cultivate that diamond inside of us? Below are steps to manage your situation.

**1. Embrace a realistic view of what's really at stake—no more and no less.**

Don't create trouble by making mountains out of molehills. Be realistic about the stakes.

**2. Focus on what you can control and not on what you cannot.**

If something's out of your control, trust the process. If it's controllable, take responsibility.

**3. Eliminate sources of pressure or stress that distract you from what's important.**

Get rid of anything that clouds your focus or prevents you from concentrating on your goal.

**4. Determine one step you can take toward your goal.**

When you choose one step toward a goal, pressure can shove you further in the right direction.

**5. Envision the positive outcomes that could come from this pressure.**

Close your eyes and see the results you desire; imagine the pressure working for you.

## **6. Talk about stories of people who've experienced post-traumatic growth (PTG).**

Trauma doesn't have to produce PTSD. Growth occurs when we process trauma's benefits.

## **7. Clarify why this outcome is important to you.**

Know your why. Be clear on why the outcome is valuable. Leverage it to push you forward.

Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting that we slip into denial. The pandemic is real and so is much of the trauma we've experienced. Anxiety is very real. All I'm saying is that we get to decide whether it turns out to be merely stressful or if the pressure eventually produces a diamond. I heard about an actress who always felt nervous before going onstage. Her coach challenged her to use a different word to describe her feeling to herself. Instead of saying, "I feel nervous," he told her to say, "I feel excited." It's the same emotional energy, but it moved her in a positive direction. Decades into my career, I've begun to do this and it has completely turned the energy from a negative direction to a positive one, even before the stress is resolved.

What if we treated disadvantages as advantages? What if the problem became a possibility? What if the stumbling block became a stepping-stone? What if the obstacle was really an opportunity?

Louis Braille was a kid who grew up in France back in the nineteenth century. When he was three, he was playing in his dad's workshop and accidentally poked his eye out with an awl, which is a sharp cobbler's tool. When his eyes got infected, he soon went blind in both eyes. He later went to a school for the blind, but he found their system for reading difficult to use. At age fifteen, Louis actually invented a new language for people who couldn't see. It is named after him, and blind people still use it today. Do you know the most interesting part of the story? Louis actually used an awl, the very tool that blinded him, to create his new system to read. You might say he used the pressure he experienced to enable him to do something positive about it.

Remember, most human beings need pressure to perform at their best. Our job is to ensure that pressure pushes us in the right direction. There's a diamond inside all of us.

## **Putting This Idea into Practice**

Reflect on a situation coming up that's causing you to feel stressed. Identify one where you feel pushed or pressured to accomplish something or to improve. On a tablet, write down how it makes you feel. You can use single words such as anxious, excited, nervous, or energized. Or you can use simple sentences such as "I feel overwhelmed" or "I feel out of control".

Next, substitute a positive word if you wrote down a negative one. For example, learn from the actress who stopped saying, "I feel nervous," and began saying, "I feel excited."



Finally, follow the seven steps in this chapter. Began seeing the positive outcomes that could happen if you used the pressure to push you forward. Remember the story of Louis Braille, who used the very tool that blinded him to create a system of reading for the blind. How can the negative pressure you feel be used to make you better? Focus on your goal, not your obstacles. Discuss your thoughts with your colleagues or students. Ask for input from them. Then go practice these ideas and apply it to your pressurized situation.

Watch for a diamond to appear.

### Talk It Over

1. What are the greatest sources of stress on your campus?
2. Have you seen someone do something positive about the pressure they feel and get better from it? What happened?
3. When have you let pressure stress you out? When have you used it to succeed?
4. What's one strategy you've employed to use pressure to make you better?



## Chapter 4:

# The Relationship Between Resourcefulness and Resilience

One of the saddest realities that surfaced from the COVID-19 pandemic was the loss of hope on the part of students. Like you, I mourn the millions globally who died from the infection. On top of that are the deaths that have stemmed from suicide. In August 2020, the CDC posted a sobering fact on their website: One in four young adults (ages 16-24) in America had contemplated suicide over the past month, due to the pandemic. Not one in fifty. Not one in a hundred. One in four.

Lily Allen was one of them.

Lily remembered losing hope, as she stared at the shifting realities of life after high school graduation. Nothing would be like she imagined. Certainly, nothing would be like she dreamed. In multiple interviews, Lily said she felt helpless and hopeless. “I was deep in my depression hole, crying in my room,” she recalled. “I honestly felt like the world was ending, all the walls were closing in on me. I couldn’t breathe. I was like, there’s no way to get better.”<sup>12</sup>

Suicide attempts were already on the rise among teens, due to the normalization of mental health problems. That data was clear in 2019.<sup>13</sup> During the pandemic, however, suicidal thoughts and attempts among teen girls increased over 50 percent, compared to 2019.<sup>14</sup> Suicidal ideation can stem from several different sources. I especially mourn the number of young people who simply run out of hope.

They give up. Sometimes quickly.

## Cultivating Healthy Habits

Many parents and educators are concerned that today’s youth will not embrace healthy habits and practices as adults. Millions have succumbed to addictive behaviors. They lack a moral compass, and there is a very real mental-health crisis. In fact, my three greatest concerns for students coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic are the following:

- anxiety (too many lack the tools or the grit to practice good mental health)
- addictions (too many practice coping mechanisms instead of coping skills)
- amorality (too many lack a moral compass to help them make healthy decisions)

Expectations should be altered but not dropped. The answer is in the middle. We must expose students to good habits and practices but not impose those practices as they become adults. They must own those decisions for themselves in adolescence.



*We must expose students to good habits and practices but not impose those practices as they become adults.*



Often, I hear academics mourn the lack of discipline in today's youngest generation. These students seem unable to delay gratification and appear to lack ambition and humility. Teens often don't exhibit critical-thinking skills, and they seem fragile when it comes to receiving hard feedback. Staff and faculty have grieved these realities in the teacher's lounge.

We must remember, however, that students are products of today's culture and the result of our leadership. They've grown up in a world of conveniences, so they may naturally avoid what is hard. They've grown up in a world of speed, so they may naturally avoid anything that's slow and requires patience. They've grown up in a world of entertainment, so they'll likely assume that anything boring is awful. They've grown up in a world that has nurtured them—at least middle-class students have—so they may naturally avoid anything unsafe and risky. They've grown up in a world of entitlement, so they may assume hard labor is to be avoided. If we don't like what we see on the college campus, we must acknowledge our students are doing what comes naturally. As universities reflect on what practices and habits they should introduce or maintain on campus, I believe they must choose activities that build countercultural habits—skills that are opposite of the realities listed above. When life is hard, slow, boring, risky, and laborious—that's when students cultivate life skills, the skill sets that enable them to practice adulting and career-readiness. The practices work like a social, emotional, and intellectual fitness center.

Our questions, then, should surround this premise: Are the practices and habits that define our campus culture producing career-ready graduates? Do the activities and traditions cultivate adults who are ready for life after graduation? Further, do the practices and habits on campus prepare them for the future in which they will spend the rest of their lives?

## Two Meta-Competencies

As I gaze across the horizon, I believe there are two meta-competencies that stand above all others. Certainly, there are several important skills graduates will need, but two of them, when present, seem to be meta-influencing the others. These meta-competencies are

1. resourcefulness

2. resiliency

In 2012, Bradford Smart released his third edition of his book *Topgrading*. It is full of insights on how to hire, develop, and keep A-players on your team. In the midst of the message, the author suggested that in the world of tomorrow, resourcefulness is king. Let me summarize and explain this message, then apply it to today's students.

Smart said that resourcefulness is the new meta-competency as employees enter the workforce. Think about it. Because information is ubiquitous, we no longer need people who know a lot. Information is readily available. You can search and find answers to almost any problem if you know where to look. That's why the virtue of resourcefulness is now the most important skill to build and find. Universities must cultivate people who know how to find answers, people who can identify and solve problems because they can find solutions far beyond our current practice. Resourceful people

- can comprehend the key problems that slow down progress
- practice critical-thinking skills to diagnose and comprehend issues
- search for and find ideas they can connect to those problems
- are able to develop a series of solutions to the problems
- have the ability to modify and implement the best solutions<sup>15</sup>

The chief reason I believe resourcefulness is a meta-competency is that a K-12 student today has a high probability of getting a job after graduation that doesn't even exist today. In fact, there is an increasing probability that they will have not only several jobs but several jobs in several industries. Many will claim they'll enjoy several careers, not just one. Each of these will require them to search and find new ways to re-invent themselves.

As teachers facilitate learning for their students, this is a profound truth to recognize. To give students an advantage as they mature into adulthood, we must equip them to be resourceful, to not shrink from digging into issues and drawing conclusions about them, and to know how to find answers for themselves. Certainly, faculty should create classrooms that demand resourcefulness on assignments. I believe coaches and staff must also create labs (or experiences) where students are required to practice resourcefulness to succeed. Our chief hurdle, in my opinion, is this: we take pride in resourcing them so well that they often don't develop any skills in resourcefulness. The most resourceful people are frequently the ones who grew up with fewer resources.

In addition, there is one more valuable competency we must be intentional to build into the lives of students: resilience. Resilience is the ability to bounce back after adversity. The speed and convenience that mark our culture have diminished this virtue. Teachers nationwide report that young people today give up too easily. They don't like problems that take too long or require too much effort to solve. There seems to be an inverse relationship between

- **options and commitment.**

With so many options and opportunities, students sometimes prefer to move on when life gets tough instead of staying committed to their original commitments.

- **attention and information.**

Herbert Simon said it best: "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention."<sup>16</sup> If content is ubiquitous, attention spans may be shortened.

- **speed and longevity.**

When results come quickly, patience levels drop. Our on-demand, instant-access culture has created a "microwave" instead of a "crockpot" expectation.

We surveyed more than eight thousand students in 2016 and discovered resilience is a rare commodity among secondary-school students. Research psychologist Angela Duckworth created a Grit Scale that can evaluate as well as compare scores of those who take it. She has shown that today's youth have measurably lower scores than those of older generations.<sup>17</sup> My anecdotal inquiries revealed that students' top remarks to teachers in K-12 education are

- "This is too hard."
- "I need help."
- "I can't do this."

Because technology has made life quick and easy, leaders and teachers must find ways to develop resiliency in students. Could it be that current practices and habits failed to prepare them to hunger for what is hard? Do these realities form what we must focus on with students? I would argue that resilience is a second meta-competency because life in today's fast paced, ever-changing world requires trial and error. Mistakes will be made. Failure will happen. Some unknown element is sure to be missed along the way. Bouncing back and bouncing forward will be a cherished emotional skill.

I also believe that there is a distinct relationship between resourcefulness and resiliency. When students learn to be resourceful, they are naturally more resilient. Why? After trial and error, students tend to see more options for solutions. Their creative juices have not been completely depleted. Additionally, when a student is resilient, they tend to have the stamina to keep trying other resources to solve their problem. They likely feel the agency and the personal strength to attempt other solutions, informed by their previous failed attempts. When students possess both of these competencies, the sky is the limit on their potential.

At the ripe age of eighteen, Alondra Carmona was already making adult decisions—and when it comes to her mom, no sacrifice is too big. Alondra was a high school senior when she gave her mom all the money she'd been saving for college in order to avoid eviction from their apartment in Houston, Texas. You likely remember that an estimated 9.2 million people were struggling to pay rent during the quarantine in 2020. Martha Zepeda is a single mother to Alondra and her two siblings. Martha had lost her job as a longshoreman at the Port of Houston three months ago and hid the news from her family. When the three sisters found out their mom was losing her job, they also found out she was three months behind in her rent and they would be evicted soon.

That's when Alondra, the hero in this story, shifted into high gear.



She had been making steady deposits to her bank account by working multiple jobs as a high school student, on top of making good-enough grades to attend college. At this point, however, she recognized the most urgent need was to help with the rent. So, she gave it all to her mom.

At first, Alondra said she gave up on going to her dream school, Barnard College in New York.

She is resourceful and resilient, however, and after second thought, decided not to give up so fast on her dream. She applied at Barnard and got accepted. Next, she applied for scholarships at Barnard and received a total of sixty thousand dollars, which covered about one year. Next, she launched a GoFundMe to ask the public for help in funding her studies and her mom's rent.

By February 2021, Alondra had raised over \$126,000. Her original hope was to raise enough money to help pay for two years of school, but thanks to the generosity of so many strangers, she said she will be able to afford all four years of her program and continue to help her mom with rent until she finds work again.

Resilient and resourceful.

*What comes to mind when you consider how you can build these competencies in students?*

## Four Messages Students Must Hear from Us

If you're seeing what we're seeing, then we must act. There are consistent messages these first-year students need to hear from you. I'm not pretending that these messages will work like a magic wand. But we must help students change their internal narrative to believe they have it in them to make it through this strange time. Past generations have endured the Great Depression, pandemics, and World Wars. Here are four messages I believe students need to hear from their teachers and parents:

### **1. "I'll give you my empathy if you'll give me your effort."**

Often, students must be reminded that this strange time isn't fun for anyone. Teachers are human too, and both students and faculty will need to agree upon a trade-off: empathy for effort. I suggest you even articulate this trade-off: "I will extend to you compassion and grace on your assignments if you extend to me your very best effort." Both must agree upon a social contract in order to make it. When one party extends what they promise, the other party must reciprocate.



## **2. “In today’s world, your attitude is as important as your aptitude.”**

Time will tell how this pandemic will affect grades and outcomes as students graduate. One truth, however, seems sure. A student’s mindset as they endure a second full year of COVID-19 will make a greater difference than their smarts. Certainly, we must encourage good grades, but senior citizens who grew up in the Great Depression will tell you it was their attitudes that enabled them to thrive.

## **3. “You must trade being fragile for being agile.”**

To be fragile and agile are antonyms. Fragile implies something is delicate and breakable. Agile implies something is adaptable and pliable. Ask any pediatrician and they will say kids are naturally resilient, at least most of them. Because we treat them as fragile, we are the ones who unintentionally make them fragile. We must convince them they can bounce back and adjust to the new normal in which we find ourselves. Why not make agility a core value of your school?

## **4. “You are strong enough to flourish, not flounder.”**

Too many languish because every message they consume (especially on social media) tells them life is awful and that we shouldn’t expect much of ourselves. Too often, it is memes, not great role models, that shape students’ worldviews. Teens need to hear a chorus of messages from caring adults—all singing in unison—that they have what it takes to rise to the occasion. Students can flourish, much like their grandparents or great-grandparents did in the difficult times of their childhoods.

# **The Path to Cultivate This Resilience and Resourcefulness**

Both of these competencies fall into the category of soft skills. Regardless of their cognitive abilities (IQ) or their academic skills (GPA), students can develop resilience and resourcefulness. In short, it is within the reach of every young person. We must keep in mind, however, that the smoothest path to equipping kids is to help them build these skills through the relationships in their life.

## **Relationships**

I know I’ve underscored this ingredient already, but it deserves repetition. Any challenging period or difficult conversation goes better when the educator and the student enjoy a strong, trusting bond. The art of truth telling is rarely constructive without a connection between the sender and receiver. We must build relationship bridges that can bear the weight of truth. This is accelerated when we model honest disclosure, transparent communication, and even vulnerable displays of emotion. In short, it requires you and me to become authentic:

- Perhaps this means we share our own fears when they feel anxious.
- Perhaps this means we remind them of our own failures when we were their age.
- Perhaps this means we find a way to be both professional and personal with them.

I have observed that most educators (administrators and teachers) begin their careers in a genuine, relational posture. We start “real.” As we age, over time, we often become less patient, more intolerant, more professional, and less personal. We move from relating like a big sister or brother to relating like a parent. We begin to look less like a quarterback and more like a referee in the game of life. In each life-station, we can become more distant. We don’t like the pain of getting too close and feeling disappointment or betrayal. We don’t like getting lied to, or we don’t like hearing the same excuses every year. So, we back up. We hide emotionally. We are professional but not as personal. To become the leaders our students need today, I suggest we must become real again.

Let me close this chapter with an illustration of the kind of approach we must take.

The Velveteen Rabbit is a heartwarming, make-believe story of some toys that can interact with one another. They belong to a little boy and are on a journey to become real.

When the story opens, the rabbit is having a hard time fitting in with his owner’s other toys. Shortly after receiving the rabbit, the little boy to whom the rabbit belongs loses interest in him, and the other toys—many of which have modern, mechanical parts that make them seem and act real—intimidate the rabbit. After all, the rabbit is made of cloth and sawdust and hardly looks like a real bunny at all. The rabbit eventually befriends a toy horse, who has lived in the nursery longer than any of the other toys. The rabbit asks the experienced toy called the Skin Horse about how a toy becomes real.

*“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”*

*“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.*

*“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”*

*“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”*

*“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”<sup>18</sup>*

I’m on a journey to become a “skin horse.”

## Talk It Over

1. Have you witnessed students giving up quickly on goals or assignments? Why is this?
2. What has been your strategy to cultivate resilience and resourcefulness in youth?
3. Is there an idea or a step from this chapter you could implement?
4. How have you deepened your relationships with students by being authentic?

## Chapter 5: Candles or Brush Fires

I lived in southern California for many years. Every year, it seemed we heard about another fire that broke out. The dry, warm weather coupled with a careless mistake can be deadly. Wildfires have been rampant, destroying miles of property as they spread.

During the summer and fall of 2018, California experienced the deadliest wildfire season in its history. A total of 8,527 fires burned an area of 1,893,913 acres, the largest area ever recorded in a fire season. By May of 2019, insurance claims had reached 12 billion dollars.<sup>19</sup>

It was terrifying.

The deadliest round of fires, however, spread ferociously through California in November. They did even more damage, killing at least eighty-five people and destroying more than fourteen thousand structures.<sup>20</sup> These fires accomplished worse damage primarily because of the wind. A person who's never lived in an area vulnerable to brush fires might assume the wind would put the fire out.

On the contrary, the fires just get worse.

The most frightening element about brush fires is that a strong wind not only fails to put them out but actually makes the fire stronger and spread faster. Hoping that a gust of wind will extinguish it is wishful thinking. A friend of mine who endured those 2018 California fires actually requested on social media, "Please pray that the winds will stop!"

A wildfire is very different from a candle.

Candles are also flames, but they react inversely to winds. The same wind that extends a brush fire will extinguish a candle. In fact, it takes only a small breath to blow candles out on a birthday cake. This is the biggest difference between the two. A brush fire gets bigger and stronger. A candle goes out. The wind actually reveals what the fire really is:

- A candle is fragile.
- A brush fire is agile.

I know two young men who both suffered severe injuries in automobile accidents. In fact, both were thrown from their vehicles and are now paralyzed. Though both of them were highly recruited athletes in high school, they now live life in wheelchairs as paraplegics. One of these guys reacted the way millions of others would react to this kind of a tragedy. He's grown bitter and pessimistic, and he has little motivation to do anything. After all, he's disabled.

The other is a dear friend of mine—Timothy Alexander. He's never looked back and continues to pursue his dream of being a positive influence on people. After progressing through rehab, Timothy continued to work out as though he was still a football player. He worked so hard (without the use of his legs) that he still made the football team at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Coaches said they wanted his work ethic and positive attitude on their team, even if he could never play a down. This victim in a wheelchair got a football scholarship. During his college tenure he worked out daily with the team, removing any excuse for laziness from his teammates. He encouraged and pushed his peers like no one I've ever seen.

Since graduating, Timothy has leveraged his story hundreds of times onstage in front of students, athletes, coaches, teachers, and parents. He's got a million-dollar smile as well as a million-dollar attitude. He's achieving his mission of being a positive influence on others.<sup>21</sup>

One guy shrunk under his challenge. The other adapted and grew.

## What Makes a Brush Fire?

It is easy to become fragile in today's high-tech, convenient world. We quit too quickly. We choose another option when the first one seems too hard. We withdraw from challenges.

So, what do we mean when we talk about becoming a brush fire?

1. Adaptability—we're flexible, figuring out a way to grow when forced to change.
2. Resilience—we bounce back and continue making progress in adverse circumstances.
3. Size and strength—we possess a growth mindset and believe the best is ahead.

Brush fire people somehow take the very challenge that would normally stop someone in their tracks and use it to push them forward. Case in point: Gene Tunney. Tunney was the professional boxer who defeated the invincible Jack Dempsey for the heavyweight crown in 1919. Too many of us don't know his story. Tunney had set a goal as a young man to be the world heavyweight champion. But tragedy struck him while he served in the military in Europe. Tunney broke all the fingers in both of his hands. His coach and doctor both told him he'd have to give up boxing. His bones would be too brittle to fight. But Tunney decided to keep his mission. He'd just change his methods to reach it.



At that point, Tunney began to train himself in the art of self-defense. He worked to become quicker, because Dempsey was bigger. He learned to run backward, knowing that facing Dempsey would mean running backward a few rounds. He revolutionized the way he approached boxing. And when he finally got the chance to fight Dempsey, Tunney whipped him. It shocked everyone. Dempsey was so humiliated that he challenged Tunney to a rematch. What happened? Tunney beat him again.<sup>22</sup>

Here's what makes this story relevant for us. Fistic experts who understand boxing tell us that there is no way Tunney could've beaten Dempsey had he not broken all the fingers in both of his hands. There's no way he could've gone head-to-head and toe to toe with Dempsey and come out alive. It was the very setback that enabled Tunney to reach his goal. His problem became a possibility. His obstacle became an opportunity. His stumbling block became a stepping-stone. Tunney adapted because he was agile, not fragile. Like a brush fire, his windy storm made him stronger and bigger in the end.

## How to Become a Brush Fire

So, what's the key to becoming a brush fire? How do we prevent ourselves from being fragile? When your winds of adversity start blowing, you've really got four options for how to respond. Observe your reactions the next time you get hit with a tough storm:

### **1. Do you curse it?**

You can get angry and resentful, shaking your fist at your adversity. You can become bitter over time, often cursing the problem and blaming others for it.

### **2. Do you nurse it?**

You can tenderly keep the problem alive and look to share your misery with others. You can wallow in a pool of self-pity, seeking sympathy for what you've endured.

### **3. Do you rehearse it?**

You can stew on it, reviewing the problem over and over but never getting past it. You can become emotionally paralyzed, getting stuck on what-ifs and regrets.

### **4. Do you reverse it?**

You can turn the very problem into a possibility. By staying on mission, the wind that could extinguish you instead becomes the tool to build you and make you stronger.

The fourth option above reminds us that the key is staying on mission. When you remain focused on your mission, you begin to see all kinds of new opportunities to use your altered circumstances for the benefit of that mission. This focus helps you interpret life and leverage it for your purpose. We must not let the "winds" distract us and eventually smother our fire.



## A Single Mom Can Be a Brush Fire

In 1994, a young mother named Joanne was at the end of her rope. She asked for a restraining order on her husband, who had become abusive. She eventually filed for divorce and became a single mom with a baby. With little money and no job, Joanne applied for welfare benefits. Her support was limited, since her mother had died years earlier and she hadn't spoken to her dad in years after a rocky relationship. By now, she had begun struggling with anxiety, depression, loneliness, and thoughts of suicide. She referred to herself as “the biggest failure I know.”

But something inside wouldn't allow her to give up.

Joanne decided to own her circumstances and return to the one task she felt gifted and called to do in her life. She moved to another country and started practicing what she loved in all her spare time. In fact, she was so committed to her goal that she didn't give up even when she was rejected twelve times. Her name is Joanne—but we know her as J. K. Rowling.<sup>23</sup>

You might say Rowling's mantra was, My situation may not be my fault, but it is my responsibility.<sup>24</sup>

J. K. Rowling gathered the grit and agility to press on in her storm and write the Harry Potter series. In 2008, Rowling explained her story at Harvard University's commencement:

Failure meant a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was and began to direct all my energy to finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one area where I truly belonged. I was set free, because my greatest fear had been realized, and I was still alive; I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter, and a big idea. And so rock bottom became a solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.<sup>25</sup>

That sounds like a brush fire to me.

## Putting This Idea into Practice

Before you attempt to help your students identify with brush fires instead of candles, I suggest you look in the mirror. If we first embody a particular quality, we have a much better chance of building that quality in those who follow us and learn from us.



Reflect on a tough time in your past. Using this image of candles or brush fires, how do you think others would describe you during that tough time?

- How did you respond?
- What could you have done better?

Now consider a current tough time you're experiencing or you know is coming your way. How do you believe you and your team will react to it? What's your prediction?

- Why do you think you and others will respond this way?
- What must you do to adapt better and become resilient in this challenge?

Discuss your answers with your colleagues or students and determine your next steps.

### **Talk It Over, Write It Down**

1. Why do you think so many people today appear more like candles than brush fires?
2. Can you name a "candle" moment and a "brush fire" moment from your past?
3. What can a person do to prepare to be a brush fire before a windy storm comes along?
4. What steps do you need to take to become more like a brush fire?

## Application: An Idea for a Next Step

Helen Keller once said something I've never forgotten:

*I long to accomplish a grand and noble task; but it is my chief duty and joy to accomplish humble tasks as though they were noble... The world is moved along not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.*<sup>26</sup>

This ebook is my encouragement for you to give a tiny push.

Over the years, I have created an image-based curriculum to ignite conversations with students about subjects like the ones in this book. We now offer this curriculum at Growing Leaders. More and more schools are now teaching Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) using our imagery. Since pictures really are worth a thousand words, we love hearing stories from hundreds of schools about how our Habitudes for Social and Emotional Learning is fostering conversations and experiences that deepen the social and emotional intelligence of the next generation. You already read about one of these: “Candles and Brush Fires.”

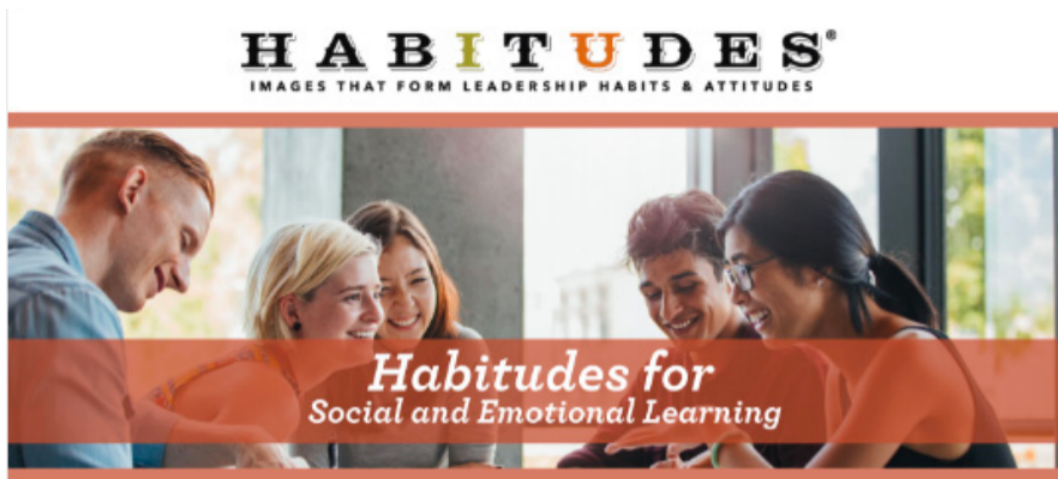
This is my opportunity to introduce some brand new images. They are created for middle school students and represent our second year of curriculum for this age group. These image-based lessons are delivered through our interactive site HabitudesOnline.

Interested?

Head on over to [www.growingleaders.com](http://www.growingleaders.com) to learn more!

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*The Habitudes for Social and Emotional Learning curriculum uses memorable imagery, real-life stories and practical experiences to teach timeless skills in a way that is relevant to students today. Students are constantly using images to communicate via emojis, Instagram, and Snapchat. Why not utilize their favorite language to bridge the gap between learning and real-life application as part of your social emotional learning program?*

Go to [growingleaders.com/habitudes](http://growingleaders.com/habitudes) to learn more



The **Emotionally Intelligent Culture** eBook is the complimentary ebook to one you've just read. As an administrator, principal, teacher or counselor you set the tone for the culture on your school campus. *But how do you help your teachers and employees thrive in such a constantly changing environment?*

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