

080: The Neuroscience of Resilience:

In Conversation with Linda Graham

Transcript:

Clinton Power: Hello. This is Clinton Power from Australia Counseling. It's my great pleasure to be speaking today with Linda Graham, MFT. Hello, Linda. How are you today?

Linda Graham: I'm very well. Thank you, Clinton.

Clinton Power: I'm very excited to be speaking with you today because we're talking about resilience. You have a wonderful book which I really enjoyed called *Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain For Maximum Resilience and Well-Being*. I'd like to begin by asking you, what is your definition of resilience?

Linda Graham: My brother gave me the title for the book, *Bouncing Back*, when he asked me what's resilience. Then he answered himself. "Oh, I know. It's bouncing back from the terrible." That's what I mean about resilience. We can meet the disappointments and difficulties and even disasters of our lives and bounce back. We can cope skillfully, effectively, even gracefully. Resilience especially means flexibility, being able to shift our perspectives and change our behaviors as the external conditions of our lives shift.

Clinton Power: That makes sense, Linda. As a therapist myself, I'm often incredibly touched and inspired by the resilience of my clients and the adversity some people have been through. How does the brain develop resilience?

Linda Graham: The capacities for resilience are innate in the brain and develop, as all capacities do, through experience. Our earliest experiences, in our family of origin especially, kindle the maturation of the brain, especially the center of executive functioning in the brain, the pre-frontal cortex which I call the CEO of resilience. Our experiences shape the patterns of response encoded in our neural circuitry so that we're likely to respond to a new situation in ways that we've responded to previous situations before.

Clinton Power: Some people seem to struggle with developing resilience. What happens in the brain when people don't develop resilience?

Linda Graham: If the people around us early on, but then even lifelong, are resilient, we learn coping strategies from them that work. We respond to life events flexibly and adaptively. If they are resilient in responding to us, if they are empathic and responsive and helpful in meeting our needs for safety and protection and comfort and soothing and regulation, we'll develop an internal secure base of regulating ourselves and relating to others in a base of resilience. If the people around us are not resilient or they're not empathic and responsive and helpful to us, if they're absent or neglectful or dismissive, if they're rejecting or critical, if they're unpredictable caught in their own unresolved trauma or even abusive or violent, then we don't fully develop that inner secure base of resilience.

Our ways of responding to perceived threats of danger may remain too rigid. They're inflexible or defensive and we're not open to learning. Or they're too chaotic, they're too unstable, and all the learning just passes right on though. When we don't develop resilience early on, then we do need to learn how to develop it as we grow up so that we can grow into lives that are secure and happy and content.

Clinton Power: Those experiences with our very early caregivers is obviously a paramount to developing resilience. When our caregivers are struggling with their own issues, that's where resilience goes wrong?

Linda Graham: That's exactly right. Yeah.

Clinton Power: Let's talk about how we can start to recover resilience. You talk a lot in your book about the neuroplasticity of the brain. Perhaps we haven't had a really supportive upbringing, and we haven't had caregivers who've modeled a healthy function. How can we start to recover that as adults?

Linda Graham: Neuroplasticity is simply the remarkable capacity of the brain to grow new neurons, to create new connections among those neurons, to create new neural circuitry and new neural pathways so that we can develop new, more flexible, patterns of coping with the ongoing experiences of our lives. The brain learns from experience. Every experience causes neurons in the brain to fire. Every experience, positive or negative. When we repeat an experience, we repeat the neural firing. The axiom in the field is neurons that fire together wire together. We can use new experiences to create new neural circuitry in the brain, even to rewire old patterns of circuitry in the brain. This self-directed neural plasticity simply means we are choosing experiences that will create new patterns of response in the brain that will allow us to become more resilient. In my book I offer more than eighty exercises that will strengthen the flexibility of the brain and thus flexibility and resilience in our behaviors.

Clinton Power: That's what I love about your book, Linda. This is very much a book for practitioners, as well as our clients. I think both of those groups of people can benefit so much, particularly clients, with some of the exercises. You talk a lot about mindfulness. Can you go a little bit deeper as to how mindfulness can help us recover resilience?

Linda Graham: Um-hmm (affirmative). When we can notice what's happening in the moment and our reactions to what's happening in the moment without being overwhelmed or hijacked by what's happening and not having to push the experience away in order to not be overwhelmed, then we can step back and reflect on the experience and shift our perspective if need be, and discern what options we have and choose to act wisely. The neural scientists now know that regular mindfulness practice strengthens the functioning of the brain structures we need to use in order to pay attention and make wise choices.

Clinton Power: Fantastic. How do you work with clients that ... One of the challenges I've come up with, Linda, sometimes is that people have very preconceived ideas of mindfulness and meditation. Often there's a very strong negative bias. People think, oh my God, I can't have an empty mind or a quiet mind. How do you start to introduce the idea of mindfulness to people you work with?

Linda Graham: I try to introduce the experience of mindfulness even before I talk about the word. When clients are having an experience in the sessions with me, I'll simply ask them, "What are you noticing now? What are you noticing now?" That's just asking them to reflect on their experience. They have to become a little mindful to do that. I don't even necessarily talk about mindfulness at first. I just lead them into the experience of it so they can see the benefit of it. Then they are more likely to open up to learning in more formal practice.

Clinton Power: Wonderful. I love that. You talk about empathy as helping with self-acceptance. Can you tell us more about how this works?

Linda Graham: Um-hmm (affirmative). When someone else can empathize with our experience, "Oh, it makes perfect sense that you feel and act the way you do." We can take in that acceptance of ourselves exactly as we are. That helps us regulate our automatic survival responses and gives us a chance to more mindfully reflect on the situation. Empathy from Others also helps us empathize with, and have compassion for, our experience. Not only accepting what's happening in the moment, but accepting ourselves in the moment. As Carl Rogers famously said, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change." When there's no shame, blame, for who we are and how we're behaving, we don't have to defend ourselves. We can relax. Then the brain reopens to the larger perspective to learning and to change.

Clinton Power: Is part of what you're saying here, Linda, is that empathy is an experience that actually helps calm the primitive parts of the brain that are related to survival?

Linda Graham: Yes. When we're in a relationship that feels safe and accepting, there are many structures in the brain that will pick that up. They can then directly quell the fear response in the amygdala in the midbrain. They can directly restore us to a sense of safety and trust and equilibrium. Being able to hang out with, spend time with, people that we feel safe with and accepted by is really crucial to bringing the brain into a state from which it can be resilient.

Clinton Power: You talk about resonant relationships in your book as well. This is a new idea I'd come across. How do they play a role in resilience?

Linda Graham: Barbara Fredrickson writes about resonant relationships in her latest book, Love 2.0. In resonant relationships we experience a meeting of mind and heart, an understanding and sympathy that creates a physiological synchrony in our brain and nervous system with the brain and nervous system of the other person. The neural chemistry in the brains of both people begins to synchronize and we feel a harmony between ourselves and the other person. It's the safety of that synchrony and harmony that actually regulates the nervous system in each person. We can rest in a natural equilibrium of the brain and body. We're calm and relaxed, yet engaged and alert. That's the optimal state of mind for being resilient.

Clinton Power: One of the things I've noticed, Linda, is that perhaps people that aren't particularly resilient, maybe they've had early life experiences that have been chaotic or very challenging, is they do tend to choose partners that have a similar kind of characteristics. I guess that starts to create relationships that aren't particularly resonant. Has that been your experience as well?

Linda Graham: What we can do as therapists is create that resonant relationship in the therapy sessions so that the client has an experience of what it's like to be in a relationship that's safe, that's trusting, that's empathic, that's responsive. That allows them then to discern where they're experiencing that elsewhere in their life or where they're not. Very often when people are struggling with difficult or even toxic relationships, one of the ways they have in to that loving empathic kind of relationship is with a pet. Very often people can experience that kind of openness and validation from a pet when it's hard to do that with people. Then they have another experience of feeling calm and relaxed. They need to know what that feels like in their body so their brain knows how to find that and how to go there more regularly.

Clinton Power: I think that's very true that pets can really open the hearts of their owners. Talk to us about semantic intelligence. This was another interesting idea. How it can help us recover resilience.

Linda Graham: The brain receives input from the body all the time. It uses that input to respond to life events, to respond to any threat or danger, and to respond to safety and trust as well. Our basic survival

responses are very fast and very automatic. We can choose to use experiences in the body that will help calm and regulate the nervous system so that we can stay open to experience and open to learning. We can evoke experiences that will rewire the brain's circuitry. There are two examples I can share that I teach all the time. One is hand on the heart where the warm touch of our own hand on our own heart center, and then breathing slowly and deeply into the heart center. Breathing a sense of ease and goodness into the heart center. Then remembering a moment when we felt safe and loved and cherished with another person or with a pet. Feeling the felt sense of that moment in the body.

Those steps can activate the release of oxytocin which is the hormone of safety and trust and bonding and belonging and calm and connect. Oxytocin is the brain's direct and immediate antidote to the stress hormone, cortisol. It helps bring the body-brain back into a state of calm and equilibrium from which we can cope. I teach that to clients all the time. We can get a similar effect when we receive a hug from someone anytime we're upset about something.

The second technique that I teach a lot is called power posing. It's using information from the body to feel confident and resilient as you're about to go into an important meeting or a job interview. You simply stand tall, feet hip-width apart, your torso lined up over your sacrum. You lift your arms over your head and a pose of triumph. You hold that posture and repeat that posture until you feel a sense of strength and energy in your body. We use information from the body to inform ourselves about ourselves. That's semantic intelligence.

Clinton Power: I love that, Linda. It reminds me of even my yoga practice when I've gone to yoga class and felt exhausted or tired or rundown. There's something about the poses that can seem to change my state and I come out of the yoga class in quite a different state. It reminded me of that, even the exercise, the power pose.

Linda Graham: Um-hmm (affirmative). That's right. The power pose that I just described really is mountain pose. It really is Tadasana. It's the movement and the pose. It's also the breathing that we do in yoga, both of which help inform the body that we're okay. We're safe and we're strong.

Clinton Power: It almost like the body knows. That wisdom is in the body isn't it? You're helping clients access it and remind themselves that they have this ...

Linda Graham: Yes. Exactly.

Clinton Power: What is reflection and response flexibility? You talk about this in your book. How does it help shift patterns of response?

Linda Graham: When we reflect mindfully we can begin to realize that our experiences and our responses to our experiences can shift. They do shift all the time unless we're locked into some rigid defense patterns. My friend, Janet Freeman, says, "Catch the moment. Make a choice." The environmental activist, Julia Butterfly Hill, says, "Every moment has a choice. Every choice has an impact." Paying attention to the choices in the moment, and choosing to make choices that are more resilient, help us shift our responses in the moment over time. Then they become a new way of being. I have a story that I can share about that if we have time.

Clinton Power: Oh, please do. Yes.

Linda Graham: Okay. This is a story that I tell in my book because it really happened, and it was a very powerful moment for me. I was walking to my office one day. I park my car in Golden Gate Park and I walk two blocks to my office. I was worried about something, so I was kind of caught up in my own thoughts. I was

distracted and I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. I stepped into a sidewalk of freshly laid wet cement up to my ankles. The whole cascade starts of, oh you stupid klutz. Look what you did. Now you've ruined your shoes. Now you'll have to cancel your clients. Now you're going to lose income. The whole rabbit hole started.

Because I'd been practicing mindfulness, I was able to catch that. I could catch what my mind was doing. I said to myself, I am sick and tired of going down this same rabbit hole. I'm not the only person on the planet today that made a mistake. This is probably not the only mistake I'm going to make today. I need to just shift my attitude and look at this in a different way. I got my feet out of the sidewalk and I pulled my shoes out of the sidewalk. This really happened. I was outside of an apartment building. It had an outdoor water facet. I was washing off my shoes. I realized that, yes, shit happens. Shift happens too. If I could shift my attitude in that moment and come up with a better response to what was happening, then I could shift my attitude in any moment.

That was the learning, that sense of being empowered and having the capacity to I can make a choice. I can choose how I'm responding to this. That's really how we're rewiring our brain for more resilience is to realize that we are someone who can make a choice and make a difference.

Clinton Power: That's a great story, Linda. What was the choice you made in that moment once you cleaned off your shoes?

Linda Graham: It was interesting. The construction workers came over to me with paper towels to wipe off my shoes. They were kind. They did not make fun of me. They did not embarrass me. I realized I could just be kind to myself too. This mistake happened. I washed off my shoes. I was actually able to save those shoes. I could just shift my attitude about the experience, but also about myself. Just bring some mindful self-compassion to myself. I'm a human being. We all go through experiences like this. I can accept myself as I am in this moment and be able to cope with what had happened and just go on with my day.

Clinton Power: That's a fantastic story. Do you have any final tips about how we can restore resilience in our lives, Linda?

Linda Graham: The field of positive psychology is about twenty-five years old. The research data from positive psychology parallels the twenty-five years of brain science in learning the role of positive emotions in shifting brain functioning and thus increasing our resilience. It's never to deny the reality or the importance of what we would call negative emotions. All emotions are signals from the body to pay attention, something important is happening. These emotions catalize our behaviors in response to what's happening. We now know that positive emotions help antidote the innate negativity bias of the brain. Meaning, we're more likely to pay attention to, and remember, negative events than positive ones. That's how we survive as a species and as individuals. We're never not going to have that.

Positive emotions help the brain shift out of the contraction of our fear-based survival responses into the larger view, into the larger picture again. That would be enough to help us be more resilient, but positive emotions also have behavioral benefits. People who practice gratitude or kindness or compassion or generosity or joy or awe or delight, et cetera, actually have less anxiety, less depression, less loneliness. There's more friendships and social connections. There's more optimism. There's better health and sleep. That also helps us to be more resilient. Resilience, in fact, is a direct measurable outcome of a regular practice of positive emotions.

Clinton Power: Is this different from making positive affirmations?

Linda Graham: Oh, yes. A positive affirmation is a thought. That's a good thing to do to interrupt the automaticity of our negative thoughts. Positive emotions work at a deeper level in the brain and in the body. When we're doing the rewiring by practicing positive emotions, we're actually rewiring the brain at a deeper level so the changes can be more long-lasting. They also can then get stored in our implicit memory so that we don't have to consciously think about the positive affirmation. We can just remember the feeling of gratitude or kindness or generosity in our body. That's enough to begin to pull the brain out of its contraction.

Clinton Power: I'm imagining is what you're talking about having an experience as opposed to a thought or an affirmation might tend to be more a thinking cognitive process. These experiences like joy, generosity, gratitude, delight, they're experiences you need to generate.

Linda Graham: Right. The whole thing about neuroplasticity is that the brain changes from experience. It's true we can use our thoughts to stimulate new experiences in the brain. The brain learns from experience. The more we can cultivate experiences and store them in our body ... My friend, Rick Hanson, talks about the importance of taking in the good. We have to be able to notice the experience, enrich it, really feel the felt sense of it in our body, linger with it for ten to twenty to thirty seconds. Then repeat the experience a couple times as we go throughout the day so that it gets stored in our long-term memory. We can choose to intentionally work with and cultivate the positive experiences that happen in our lives because that's a choice to rewire our brain.

Clinton Power: Linda, I'm very excited to let people know as well that you're coming to Australia this year. Can you let us know about your plans for that?

Linda Graham: Okay. I'm teaching in September. September 3rd and 4th in Brisbane, and September 7th and 8th in Melbourne. Sponsored by Kassan Associates, so that website. It's a two-day training for clinicians about many, many, of these techniques and tools, hopefully, in an experiential format so that the clinicians actually get to experience the tools themselves. It gives us more conviction that they really work, and then we're likely to try to use them with our clients.

Clinton Power: Fantastic. We'll put the links on the show notes so people can find out more about that training and register as well. Is this your first time to Australia, or have you been before?

Linda Graham: No, it's my first time. I'm really excited to come. I truly am.

Clinton Power: That's very exciting. Tell us a bit more about your book. I know it was launched in 2013. It's had incredible success. Thirty-five five-star reviews on Amazon. What has been the response to your book since you published it?

Linda Graham: It won two national awards in America. I'm very proud of that actually. The 2013 Books for a Better Life Award, and the 2014 Books for a Better World Award. What is most important to me about the book is that people find the exercises accessible. People will go to the table of contents of exercises, try an exercise. If it works they can read the neuroscience. They can read the theory. They can read the stories behind it. These exercises are immediately applicable. They're very directly practical. Many of the exercises are available as audio recordings on my website or as resources for recovering resilient posts on my website. There's articles and flyers for my workshop. All of that is freely available and easily downloadable on the website.

Clinton Power: Wonderful. Two questions, Linda. Where can people get your book, and where can I get in touch with you?

Linda Graham: Okay. The book is available on Amazon and in bookstores. The website is www.lindagraham-mft.net. These days you can just Google Linda Graham and Bouncing Back. It will come right up. I'm happy to take questions from people on how to contact me by email. It's on the website. There's a lot of interaction and back-and-forth through my website.

Clinton Power: Yes. I also subscribe to your newsletter. Lots of great content that comes from you on a regular basis. I imagine people can sign up through your website. Is that right?

Linda Graham: Yeah. Yes, that's exactly right, on every page.

Clinton Power: Great. The book is Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain For Maximum Resilience and Well-Being by Linda Graham. Highly recommended for the layperson and practitioners. Certainly one of the things I'm going to be doing is using a lot of these exercises with my clients because I think they're very client-friendly. I've tried a few out already and they've been received very well by clients.

Linda Graham: Thank you. It's good to hear. Thanks. It's very encouraging to hear.

Clinton Power: Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today, Linda. I wish you all the best for your tour of Australia. I hope we can speak again sometime.

Linda Graham: That would be lovely. Thank you very much, Clinton.

Clinton Power: Bye for now.

Linda Graham: Bye for now.

Clinton Power: I hope you enjoyed that interview with Linda Graham. I thought what she said was fantastic content and really peaked my interest. If you'd like to get her book called Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain For Maximum Resilience and Well-Being, we've created a quick link so you can go straight through the Amazon store and get a copy of her book either in Kindle for your e-reader or for paperback. Just go to australiacounseling.com.au/bouncingback. You can go straight to the book and get it for your own library. Until next time, bye for now.