

Taking on the World Today One Pause at a Time

I am the only child of my parents, an engineer and an accountant. My destiny to be a left-brained thinker, more quantitative and analytical rather than intuitive, was cast in stone well before I got my hands on my first TI-81 graphing calculator. Growing up as a second-generation quant, I cannot recall many times that were devoted to processing emotions and feelings in my parents' house. Ours was a family that was and still is more comfortable with cause and effect and, frankly, conversational economy. Myself, I tend to default to the roll of fixer when I see there is pain – either physical or emotional, especially with my children.

Casey and I are raising two wonderful children, each of whom is filled with joy, laughter, and caring hearts. These qualities, however, do not provide them with emotional armor as they are not immune from the rapid and recent changes that have impacted our lives. Emotions and anxieties get expressed in wild ways during our new social distancing phase of our lives where work, school, and home lives collide with each other in a confined space without the other and, until now, underappreciated aspects of our lives that re-center our psyche.

One of our children (I shall refer to her as “Trooper” to give her some anonymity), is such a strong and typically over-functioning girl, having adjusted to and excelled in different learning environments on three different continents by the time she reached the age of seven. But, to have witnessed the outbursts, frustrations, and anxieties that get aimed directly at Casey and me recently while we have been at home has shaken my emotional balance.

Sure, I can see some signs of stress in myself coming from far away, the clenched fists with white knuckles and teeth gritted hard enough to crack years of accumulated dental work. These are the signs that I am loading my emotional volley to be lobbed right back at Trooper to prove with splendid volume and intensity that her parents are “right” and I know how to fix whatever is ailing my little Peanut if she would just listen to me.

I mean, I'm aware of what's happening in our lives and I get it. There's been a tremendous amount of change in all our lives. I just can't fix it. And believe me, I've tried - because I can figure this stuff out. I can. Just give me some time and I'll find a way to make it better. That's what's worked for me in the past so why would this be any different.

There's been some shouting. There's been crying that leaves a collage of crumpled tissues on the kitchen table.

One recent evening, with my strategic emotional reserves empty, Casey and I were confronted with an onslaught of emotions directed at us. I readied my defensive response position with fists clenched and fingernails digging into my palms, feet set for stability, all things that lead up to a retaliatory retort to show I knew what needed to be done. Instead, I sat down exhaustedly next to Cooper, I mean Trooper, and confessed that I know that I am not overly sensitive to nuanced emotional changes to those around me or even within myself. I didn't have the energy for another shouting match that left us both crying. I continued to tell her that when presented with an issue, I struggle to be restrained in my approach and just listen. I typically jump immediately into fix-it-mode. My confession, in part, allowed us to reach some level of understanding and sense of calm with each other.

I don't know what it was about that moment that gave me the courage to be emotionally exposed with my daughter. I don't recall having been so open with anyone about my personal realizations. Why did I do this at this moment with Trooper? How else might I try to change? These are the things that I reflect on during these days.

In the meantime, I remain committed to breathing more calmly in times of stress, mine and others, and revel in the small joys of our COVID lives. I occasionally lurk in our kids' online class meetings and smile when I see how they interact with their teachers and friends. I get a first-row seat to watch Trooper tackle fractions. I've enjoyed watching Trooper's resourcefulness as she creates new couture fashion line out of household items. Family meal prep times are things that I shall remember long after I stop checking on COVID statistics. But mostly, I've been listening more.

by Tim Okabayashi