Web-based Radio Program

The Road to Mental Health – Understanding and Overcoming the Most Common Disorders

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Good morning. This is Dr. Greenspan bringing you our web-based Radio Show. Thank you for joining us today.

As you know, we just completed our series on children with learning challenges, learning differences, and learning strengths, and now we are going to start a new series on something that should be of interest to everyone – those with children with special needs and also those whose children have other challenges as well, as well as those who are interested in adults. The theme for this next series is going to be, "The Road to Mental Health – Understanding and Overcoming the Most Common Disorders." We are going to talk about depression, anxiety, attentional problems like ADD and ADHD, impulse control problems or behavior problems that are sometimes referred to as "conduct disorders," children with mood swings or bipolar patterns, as well as some other common mental health problems such as obsessive compulsive disorders. The reason why we are going to talk about these is (1) many children with special needs also have other emotional challenges, like attentional problems or behavior control problems. Also, (2) some children who do well, who start off on the autistic spectrum, move off the spectrum because of excellent intervention and excellent work by families and parents, but then show signs of anxiety or depression or attentional problems that need addressing as well. And, (3) there is a huge number of individuals, both adults and children, with these problems, so probably according to current estimates, around 18% have some type of a mental health problem in childhood. If we look at adults and look at those who have problems but don't meet all the clinical criteria for an official diagnosis, we are probably talking about 1/3 of the population.

So it is very important that we have an approach to mental health challenges in general that is consistent with the overall model we have been advocating for children with special needs. It can be helpful. The model we will be presenting over these next series of Radio Shows, is one where we talk about first, which will be today, the overall atmosphere or overall family patterns we want to help children to overcome or make progress who have mental health challenges. Then we are going to talk about specific challenges, like depression, anxiety, and attentional problems, and help to tease out new understanding in these discussions of the developmental pathways that lead to these problems. The reason why the developmental pathways will be so important to tease out, is because each pathway will provide the clues for the types of work or help that families and therapists can provide to help individuals master these challenges.

We are developing new approaches for some of these problems that are much more comprehensive and much more developmentally based than one is commonly accustomed to, so rather than just using psychotherapy or just using medication, which may have a role in some of these cases, we'll be reflecting on the important role of family and the home atmosphere and the

school environment, and other supportive environments to help individuals overcome these challenges. So we'll be talking about a much more comprehensive approach.

Now to begin with, let's talk about the general characteristics that we want in the environments of individuals who have any type of mental health problems. This is especially true of the home environment, but also of the school environment, work environments for adults, or recreational environments. Here, is the nub of what health people overcome or make progress who have any type of mental health problem. One is, the environment, and again, we'll give examples mostly from the family environment, but apply these same principles elsewhere, needs to be very calm and regulating. It needs to tailor that to the individual needs of the person – the child or adult. So what is regulating for one individual may not be regulating for another. For example, individuals who have a lot of stress and anxiety and are irritable or even individuals who are overwhelmed easily and may be out of touch with reality and having distortions of what they think is real versus unreal, whether it's their beliefs or their perceptual experiences, these are often individuals who are easily overwhelmed from the irritable, anxious person to the person who is having distortions in their appreciation of reality. These individuals especially need a calm, soothing environment. Here is where are principles are always counter-regulating. If they are irritable, if they are overloaded, we have to calm or more soothing. The tendency here, is to throw fuel on the fire. So when someone gets anxious, it makes us anxious, it becomes contagious. If we get a little hyper, we may get a little intrusive, we don't know what to do, and then the whole family atmosphere or the school atmosphere becomes disregulating. So we have to always counter-regulate, help the person who is overwhelmed, overloaded, and basically calm down. The overall atmosphere should be one of that for such individuals.

On the other hand, you have individuals who are more depressed and lethargic and laid back, or individuals who retreat into their own world and get lost in their own fantasies. What is regulating for them is to be pulled into a more shared world where they are part of a world of things happening, where they take into account the sights, the sounds, and the movements of others, and their physical environment. But it has to be done in a very gradual and respectful way so you can't overwhelm the person. For them what is regulating is a little more energy, but not an anxious energy, but one that pays attention to their interests and builds on it. So a person, for example, who is very self absorbed and lost in his own world and maybe only finds comfort in computer games, whether it's a child or adult, you may need to approach that person through the computer game, very gradually, very slowly step-wise, fostering a little more interaction with the environment – initially you, the computer, and the person, and then you and the person, getting them used to hearing just human sounds and seeing more sights and being a little more interactive. That begins the process of getting them more regulated, vis-a-vie the outside world. Good regulation and good soothing is not just letting a person retreat into their own world, because that can be overwhelming in a different way, whereas the anxious person or the person who is unrealistic is overwhelmed by the ordinary experiences of life. The person who retreats can get overwhelmed by their own inner world, not having any balance with the external world, and that can be equally overwhelming, although it is quiet and one doesn't know about it.

So the first characteristic of our family environment for any type of mental health challenge, is a calm, regulating one, tailored to the individual needs of the person involved. We'll talk a little bit later about how you profile the individual characteristics of the person to tailor that regulating environment to meet the needs of their particular nervous system and how it works.

The second characteristic of our environment – our family environment or our school environment – that will help people or individuals overcome or make progress in terms of their mental health challenges, is to have environments that provide human relationships and provide some engagement that are always offering some opportunity to form warm, pleasurable, respectful, gradually closer and more intimate relationships. Families, obviously, can provide this the best, but schools and teachers can provide it also. Here too, we want to tailor it to the needs of the individual, so for example a child who comes from foster care where they have been shifted around quite a bit from one foster care setting to another, may require an educational setting with a more consistent teacher and we may want to find a setting where they can be with the same teacher for many years so they have a more consistent relationship, rather than having to lose that person, like they have been losing their foster parents all the time. A person who is very self absorbed, or likes toys or just computer games, or gets caught up in their own kind of compulsive rituals, may need to be pulled into relationships very gradually and very slowly because if not, they will feel overwhelmed and they will retreat back to their rituals or back to their inanimate objects. A person who is anxious, as we talked about before, and overwhelmed and clingy and needy, may be very dependent and easily form relationships but they are very need-based, and for that person the engagement and the relationship may need to provide a little more balance; help that person be a little more assertive in their relationship and take a little more initiative, make it more of a two-way relationship as opposed to one of dependency and clinging where the person is basically saying, "Help me, I need you, hold me, take care of me," but one where they are sensitive to your needs as well. So the way to engineer that is as you empathize and as you listen and as you foster the intimacy, you also try to reciprocate and share a little bit in a real relationship and a real family as opposed to a therapist who maybe wants to keep some of that anonymity, a little bit about what you are doing and help them learn how to take an interest in the other person so it's a two-way engagement and a two-way pattern. Again, this will have to be done very gradually, particularly for the person who is unrealistic or who has trouble holding onto reality because they may get overwhelmed if you share too much with them, or demand too much too quickly. So you may just have to be soothing and supportive and offer that relationship in a very gradual way. Gradually there too, you can expand it to be more sharing and more reciprocal.

The person who is depressed or withdrawn will need a little more wooing to be pulled into that relationship than the person who is anxious and needy. The person who is impulsive and exploits people and treats people like objects and things, moving from one relationship to another very quickly, may need a long time to learn to be warm, empathetic, and intimate. So one would have to be very patient with this person and provide the consistency of that relationship even though the other person is constantly sabotaging it by making one feel unimportant, exploited, or like a chair or table rather than another human being, and hope that the milk of human kindness slowly wears their way into the other person's heart and you become a real person. That usually happens, but it may require months or maybe even years of patience, empathy, and warmth before you sense that kernel of real warmth emerging.

So the first two characteristics are probably the most important ones – offering that nice, soothing, calm environment and that relationship that is both geared to the needs of the person.

The third characteristic is helping the person experience and communicate and understand the different emotions of life; that human beings are basically emotional creatures, have lots of different emotions, probably an infinite texture and variety because every shade of

anger, sadness, joy, sorrow, or curiosity has an infinite texture to it. We can describe it as the poets do, in a million different ways. Before one can be a good describer of their feelings, or talk about feelings or understand their feelings, they have to experience it. So it is hard to talk about your anger or your sadness or your loss or your competitiveness, which we all know is part of good therapy, unless you experience these feelings. The more subtly you experience these feelings, the more ritually you can eventually describe them and work with them and learn to cope with them. But, the first step is to experience these feelings and to be able to recognize them in others. That has to do with what we call two-way emotional communication, often with facial expressions and gestures, as well as with words. Here, what is very important as part of that relationship is to try to have lots of back-and-forth interaction where emotional expressions and eventually emotional descriptions are also being exchanged, but not in a cross examining way, or not in a question/answer way, or not in a way that is going to be upsetting, but in an empathetic way. The first basis for doing this as a family or as a school or work environment, is to provide empathy and responses to a wide range of emotional expressions; to be basically animated responders to the individual; to tune in to how they are feeling, basically. As you tune in with your own expressiveness, with your own eyes, with your own facial expressions, they feel recognized. They feel their emotions are being acknowledged without even words. In other words, when you picture an anxious person or picture oneself as being very anxious, and you are frantic about something, and somebody calmly listens and their facial expression conveys real understanding and warmth and calmness to your anxiety, and yet shows a recognition of your anxiety and isn't "poo-pooing it" or saying "You're overreacting" and giving you a dismissive look, but giving you a concerned look, but not an exaggerated look like, "Oh my God this is the worst thing in the world…" but finding that nice, middle ground of concern, understanding, warmth, and reassurance, all in their facial expression and all in the way their eyes look and the way their mouth is forming and the way they nod their head and the way the body posture. That's very reassuring, even before they utter a word. It also confirms to you that feeling. As they do this for your full range of feelings, you are becoming more comfortable in experiencing different feelings. For some people who don't experience many different feelings, it's a gradual process of growth because through this kind of relationship, as an inkling of a feeling emerges, and that gets acknowledged in the facial expression of the other person, then there will be a gradual expansion over many weeks, months, or even years.

Also, one can create experiences where new feelings are experienced. Where a person has no joy, you try to find activities of interest and pleasure. A person who never asserts themselves or is fearful of assertiveness, experiences what they need to assert themselves, whether it's something as simple as passing the bread or going to the fridge and bringing somebody else an apple rather than just themselves, that does not only acts of kindness but also assertiveness, where they are becoming the leader. They are experiencing the feelings that go along with that – handing the other person the apple and seeing how that feels. As you nod knowingly and nod warmingly and nod with appreciation, they see the counter-response to that. That is very important too, to have the full range of feelings.

Now for many individuals with mental health problems, the full range of feelings are going to be scary. For the anxious person, often aggression is scary. For the depressed person who is self absorbed, assertiveness and competition may be scary. For the person who is very impulsive or self-centered, sometimes called narcissistic, true intimacy and true warmth may be scary. It's going to be very important, here, to help the individual by experiencing new feelings,

but gradually and slowly so it doesn't overwhelm them. The compulsive person or the ritualistic person who likes to have a very narrow range of feelings and control everything with their rituals or their practices is going to need to have a very slow step-wise process. One will have to approach them through their interests and gradually expand that range of feelings. But that is very important for overcoming a variety of mental health problems, because many of them boil down to problems at this stage of individuals who, for a variety of reasons both often biological and/or psychological, have not had opportunities to develop the full range of feelings and flexible coping strategies.

So the key here is to keep expanding that emotional range, but again tailoring it to the individual needs of the person you are involved with. For some individuals, it is going to be very, very gradual. There is no substitute for empathy and understanding in your facial expressions, and to reflect the mood and emotion of the person you are talking with, and then gradually try to provide experiences that expand it a little bit, and also make it more reciprocal in the sense that the person can also understand your facial expressions and your reactions. The best way to help them understand that is to be animated, but very gradually yourself, not to demand you understand how I feel about this situation right away verbally, but just help them experience you as another individual through your empathy first, and then through your counter reaction second.

Now when you are doing this, you are also always counter regulating, like we talked about earlier, or counter balancing. If a person is agitated and upset, you are very soothing. If a person is very lethargic, you are a little more energizing. If the person is very impulsive, you are a little more containing. If the person is a little more fragmented, you try to be a little more organized. So you are always counter balancing the other person as you are working on emotional expressiveness. But remember, the foundation for mental health is not so much the verbalization of feelings, which is important, but the experience in yourself and in others of a wide range of feelings. These need to cover the full range of human experience, from closeness, independency, and love, to assertiveness, curiosity, and healthy competition and healthy coping with anger.

Now the next characteristic of our family environment and our other environments that will promote mental health and overcome the mental health disorders, is where we add on to the experience of your own other's emotions; the ability to actually form ideas having to do with feelings, to be able to put them into words, both creatively and logically. Creatively we see this in the pretend play of kids who have the dolls hugging or kissing or fighting or competing – we often see the full range of the human drama. But we see some children who shy away from anything assertive or competitive or with conflict, or who shy away from taking care of others and only are fighting and having conflict. We want to promote the use of ideas, and with children first through play, and with older children it can be through other creative endeavors such as creating dramas, writing scripts for movies, creating short stories, drawing, artwork, or sculpture. The creative part of it gives the person the opportunity to express and experience and learn about the world of feelings in ways that don't have to conform to reality or don't have to conform to problem solving right away. So you can have your wished for solution where you have all the toys you want if you are a child, or if you are an adult, where you have all the successes you are wishing for. Or you are getting even with those who annoy you. Or you are allowed to create your own little retreat where no one bugs you. All that can be embedded in the creative stories or dramas of the creative use of ideas.

Then for the logical use of ideas, it is important to be able to verbally or through picture form, describe your feelings so that those feelings you are experiencing that we just talked about, as the other characteristic of our environment that helps individuals, is to now be able to put these feelings into a symbolic or verbal picture form, because that allows you to discuss it and problem solve with it. If you are needing more affection, you can talk to your spouse about that. If you are a child you can tell mommy or daddy you need more holding time or more cuddling or more "lovey." If you are angry, you can discuss your anger and use the word rather than maybe having to act it out. What we find is that this ability to put feelings into symbols, words, or pictures, helps individuals not to have to use their impulses or behaviors. They can now use words or ideas so they not only experience a wider range of feelings gradually, but now can describe them in words or ideas. They can use creativity in play if you are a child or short stories or sculptures or pictures if you are an adult to explore feelings that they don't want to chance or shouldn't be chanced in reality like a lot of anger, aggression, or excessive neediness or despair. So they can give voice through their creative endeavors to these feelings as well.

So these go together, somewhat, and the environment needs to provide an atmosphere where creative use of ideas is supported. With kids, that means a lot of Floortime and play with them where all their ideas are respected. Interestingly, children who start off being aggressive, and if you are empathetic and play along with that, it will develop themes of nurturing and warmth where the dollies are being taken care of or the doctors come and help fix the wounds.

Similarly, adults who are impersonal or just angry, your empathy for their verbal expression will eventually produce warmth, concern, and the other side of the coin – more verbalization and more ideas about dependency or closeness or getting needs met. You don't have to push these things – they will occur gradually. If you are a family member, you are not playing therapist, you are just simply creating the atmosphere where these things can emerge naturally.

Using ideas and having a wide tolerance for expressing the full range of feelings through ideas is our critical fourth characteristic of environments that help overcome. Again, these often have to be sensitive to the individual differences – the anxious person is going to have a lot of ideas about their security needs, about needing you to help them calm down, about reassurance about their fears and worries so the child will want to know 100 times how to be sure that the robbers won't come in at night and steal him away or won't hurt daddy when daddy is away on a trip. The spouse who is worried about their spouse will need the same type of reassurance. But rather than offering reassurance too quickly, listen and empathize and help them become better poets of their feelings; more elaborate in their descriptions. That is the key. That is reassuring in its own right. The reassurance can come at the end, but often the words of others make us feel anxious and we all have our, as family members or teachers or even therapists, we all have our buttons that get pushed so we are less empathetic or less sensitive or less tuned in to certain feelings. It's very important, though, to tune in to all the feelings. So recognize one's own limitations and try to broaden one's self in providing this environment.

For depression, for example, we may be uncomfortable with a person's implicit neediness, or wanting to be taken care of, or their sadness may scare us, or the depths of their despair may touch on feelings we have. But listening, empathizing, and being aware of that helps us tune in. The sensitive environment that can tune in to a wide range of feelings will be much more helpful here, but it is a gradual process of mutual learning on both sides.

Helping the person becoming a poet of their feelings through your empathy; through your concern; through your listening; through your non-intrusive but clarifying or amplifying question, occasionally, you provide that part of the experience, which is very, very important and very, very, very helpful.

The next characteristic of our helpful environment is to help the individual try to make sense of their internal worlds. Try to take perspective on it. Try to understand why they are angry, sad, needy, scared, anxious, or impulsive. This is no easy task for any environment, but it is an attitude that exists in families, some more than others. In some families with children, for example, when the child says they want to go outside, they naturally ask, "Why? What do you want to do?" In other families, it's just "Yes" or "No." The "why" stirs up this kind of reflective attitude that helps people want to understand things. Or, if the child is looking sad, ask "Why so glum today, sweetheart? What happened?" Or, "Gee, it sounds like something has made you unhappy today," etc. In other families, it is just "Cheer up! You have nothing to be glum about" which hardly is going to get at the causes of things. Same thing for teenagers or adults. Again, you don't have to ask an intrusive question, you can just comment on, "Boy, it looks like today was a rough day" or "…a great day" and open the door to more dialogue that implies an understanding and making sense of things.

So always be working with the person to make sense. Now that is particularly hard where the person may be unrealistic and you feel that they are not being logical. Well, they need more sense-making discussions than anyone else. So the person who is blaming others – "It's so-and-so's fault" or "My teacher was mean to me" or "Everyone is a culprit" and there's no sense of what you are doing – it's tempting to try to get in there and say, "Well look at your own role in this" and "Come on, stop blaming others." But you have to first understand why it's necessary to blame others. "Gee, it sounds like a lot of people were mean today. What do you think was going on?" That gets the person curious. Gradually, over many weeks or months as you acknowledge the way they view the world, ask them to look at the bigger picture with you. "What was going on?" "How come they were all so mean today, do you think?" "I don't know, I don't care, I just want them to be nice." Maybe look at curious – "Did they all wake up on the wrong side of the bed?" Eventually it will lead around to, "Gee, is there something I do that puts people off, that gets people to be meaner to me than others?"

But that has to be a very gradual process. This is not, again, playing therapist, although therapists will often do this because of their training and background, but it just makes the problem solving process very gradual. It starts with very basic things. Just a person who wanders from topic to topic and goes, sort of, more free associatively talking about A and then C and then E – just clarify and amplify in being lost. "Wait, I'm confused. You were telling me about A and now about C and now about F – I'm lost here." Let the person do the clarifying. This is especially important for children, but also adults who go off on tangents in their discussions. So first you have to build the structure of logic in the use of words, ideas, pictures, or symbols, and then you can apply it to the world of feelings a little bit more, but again, be very gradual. Recognize that each of the individuals that we have talked about, whether it is the impulsive person, the depressed, or the anxious person, is that they have different feelings that they can't be logical about, so the anxious person may be quite logical about feeling A but not about feeling B. So their fear of people being injured or hurt or taken away from them or their panic may seem quite illogical. But their appreciation of, let's say, what it means to take care of a child or of how one gets good nurturing may be quite logical.

So we all have holes in our logic in the areas where we have our problems and that is part of the reason why we have the problems. So don't expect the other person who you are trying to be helpful to, to be equally logical in all areas. In fact, look for illogic in the areas where their problems are, whether it is fears, or whether it's depression and they are convinced that nothing will ever get better and they will be gloomy forever or despairing forever, or the person who is caught up in their compulsive rituals and unless they wash the door three times, something terrible will happen. You have to respect the illogic of their logic and approach it very gradually, starting with empathy and verbalization and help them look at that in comparison to other things that they approach in life where they have more logic. The person who is impulsive or self-centered has a logic that seems illogical to most, which is that they can't trust people. Well, eventually they may let you know that they have good reason for that feeling or that belief.

So helping individuals be logical is another characteristic, and making sense of the world is another characteristic of our environments that promote mental health and promote understanding of mental health disorders.

As we were talking, it is also important for the environment to make sense and to help the individuals make sense of their feelings and their internal world, and so our environments that help are sense-making environments and logical environments and stay reality based while promoting the exploration of feelings and creativity. But again, it is done by tailoring to the individual and it's done very gradually and very empathetically.

Now there are also other characteristics having to do with promoting high level making sense skills. Making sense can occur at many levels, from just understanding the reason for one's anger to understanding in a more complicated way the degrees of feelings, etc., etc.

Next week we will go into the additional characteristics of the environments that help in a more general way and complete our discussion of this. Also we'll talk a little about how this helps even with complex disorders that have many different causes – biological ones, experiential ones, combinations of both. So once we complete our discussion of the helping environments and the ideal environment more generally, we'll talk about our overall model of mental health and mental illness. Then we are going to go into specific disorders and how to work with individuals with anxiety, depression and other disorders. So we will speak to you next week, thank you for joining us today, and this is just the first half of the helping environment – we will talk more about this next week. Thank you.