

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 9: Dr. Marc Brackett

Record Date: 10/15/14

Length: 17:33

Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Well hello, and welcome to *Unrestrained*, the Podcast series from CPI. This is your host, Terry Vittone. I'm joined today by my guest, Dr. Marc Brackett. Hello, Marc.

Marc: Hi, how are you?

Terry: I'm well, thanks. My guest today is Marc Brackett. He is the Director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. He is also a senior research scientist in psychology, and Faculty Fellow in the Edward Zigler Center in Child Development Social Policy at Yale University. He co-created the RULER, and has developed two university courses on emotional intelligence.

Dr. Brackett is the author of more than 80 scholarly publications, including six social and emotional learning programs. He is the lead developer of the RULER Approach, an evidence-based social and emotional learning program that has been implemented in hundreds of schools throughout the United States and abroad. RULER advances the concept that teaching children and adults a set of social and emotional skills contributes to personal wellbeing, engaging learning and environments in both greater academic achievement and workplace performance.

If we could jump in here, Dr. Brackett; if you could give our listeners a short history of emotional intelligence as a field of academic study and where the Yale Center fits in?

Marc: Sure. Emotional intelligence was coined by two psychologists back in 1990. Their names are Peter Salovey, who is now the President of Yale; and Jack Mayer, who is a professor at the University of New Hampshire. And that's where the concept originated back from these two researchers coming together to think through what it meant to be smart about your emotions.

Terry: And so that was just an emerging field then at that point, and how did you become aware of it?

Marc: Well, when I was younger and thinking about what I was going to do for my professional life, I was interested in this field of emotional intelligence for personal reasons. I needed these skills, but also I was working on a curriculum for

school systems to teach emotional intelligence; and planning this framework was really important to me. And eventually I got my doctorate with Jack Mayer and then worked with Peter Salovey at Yale for the last decade, building programs to teach emotional intelligence in schools.

Terry: So you guys are really on the forefront of this discipline?

Marc: We are.

Terry: You describe RULER as an evidence-based approach that helps schools integrate emotional intelligence into their everyday practice. I'm wondering if you could tell our listeners about the RULER acronym, and then explain how you gathered some of the evidence that supports your approach?

Marc: RULER is an acronym that describes the skills of emotional intelligence. And those skills are recognizing emotion in self and others; that is the R. Understanding the causes and consequences; that's the U. Labeling emotion, (L) expressing emotion (E) in healthy and appropriate ways, and then finally the last R is regulating emotion effectively. The RULER is that acronym that describes the five critical emotional intelligence skills.

And then what we've done over the last 15 years or more is built an approach, which we'll call RULER as well, to bringing emotional intelligence to schools. And essentially RULER is a set of tools. For example, there is a Mood Meter that helps build self-awareness and vocabulary around emotion. And there are other tools like the meta-moment, which we call our tool for self-regulation, and other tools as well.

Terry: Could you talk about the Mood Meter a little bit, and how that looks? I think people would be interested in envisioning that.

Marc: The Mood Meter is our signature tool for RULER and emotional intelligence. And we actually have an app now that people can download and use to build their awareness. It's just moodmeterapp.com. The Mood Meter is a tool built on emotion theory, and essentially asserts that our feeling space is the byproduct of two things. The first is kind of our appraisal of the environment; how pleasant or unpleasant is the environment that we're in. So you can think about it for kids, you know, when they walk into the school, are they unpleasant or pleasant? When you get home to you feel unpleasant or pleasant?

And then the second dimension is energy, or activation, and that's kind of how much juice you have in your body. Are you feeling negative vibes, for example, and you're about to fall sleep, or plus vibes, where you feel activated?

And essentially what happens is that you cross the two axes, pleasantness and energy, to create these four quadrants, the yellow, the red, the blue, and the green.

And briefly, yellow is for high-energy pleasant emotions, like you're excited or happy. Red is for high-energy unpleasant emotions, like anger or anxiety. The blue is for low energy, unpleasant feelings, like down, disappointment, sadness. And the green is for calm, pleasant emotions, like tranquil, peaceful, and content.

Terry: Okay. And how does locating yourself on this matrix, how does that start to help you?

Marc: Well, one thing we argue in our research, and also in our practices, is that if you can name it you can tame it. When you have the ability to articulate clearly what's going on for you on the inside, it helps you create a model in your head for your feelings state, and then it also allows you to think about what you need to either keep that feeling or shift it.

Terry: So just by having a locus of your approximate emotional state at the time, if you find it desirable to change it, at least you have a location where you are at right in that moment.

Marc: Exactly. It's very hard to know what to do with your feelings if you don't know what you're feeling. Upset, what does that mean? Are you down, disappointed, frustrated, or angry? Because, if you can articulate clearly what your emotional experience is, then you could start thinking about, well, okay, if I'm just disappointed, that means that my expectations weren't met. Whereas if I'm angry it means I'm seeing something as unfair. And of course the strategy that we would need to manage those discreet emotions are quite different.

Terry: What's the next step in that process?

Marc: The next step is to think about whether or not that emotion is useful for what you are doing or about to do. So if I'm feeling down or disappointed and I'm about to do or be in a conversation with you, it's probably not the best mood stage, right, to come on this line and be very down and low, and (ironically) "Yeah, it's fine." You know, that's going to drive the way I'm thinking and my behavior.

So I may say to myself, "Marc, you're about to be talking to someone about this work. Where do you want to be? Well, I think kind of somewhere between yellow and green is a good place, right?" I don't want to be mad; I'd get kind of out of control. I also don't want to be just calm and content. Maybe hopeful, energized is a good word. And then I can think about what I need to get there. So is it a cup of coffee, is it a glass of water, or do I do a few jumping jacks, to talk to a friend on the phone, as my strategy.

Terry: How would you begin to introduce this concept of RULER to an educator?

Marc: Well, in our work in schools we believe that it's important to work with the leadership team first. So because superintendents and principals are the decision

makers, we want them to drink the Kool-Aid, right? We want them to feel like this is something that they can't do without in their school district, recognizing that until kids feel safe and valued, until they have strategies to manage their emotions effectively, the school probably won't be as effective as it possibly can.

We start with leaders and then we work with our teachers, and then we train them about their own emotions, so that the classroom, the curriculum, of course, we want family to get all involved as well.

Terry: Can you talk about the three phases involved in bringing RULER into a school system?

Marc: Phase I really is this idea of making sure the mindset in a school district is one in which emotions matter; that's the first piece. I do actually believe that how people feel makes a difference, in terms of their thinking and judgment, their relationships. And then we work to build the leadership teams that are necessary to do the roll out. Then we start doing that training piece, and then ultimately we want the school to be self-sufficient so that they're less reliant on program developers and more reliant on their resources internally to have this as a sustainable part of the way the school does business.

Terry: I see. So can you go with some of the ways that those metrics might be evidenced, that supports the effectiveness of RULER?

Marc: In our research, which we've done multiple kinds of studies, meaning we've done implementation analysis, we study the quality of the implementation and how that influences performance. And we've also done randomized, controlled trials, where we randomly assign schools to receive, or not receive, RULER. And we track student performance and the climate of schools longitudinally, and what we've shown in our studies is that schools that take this work seriously and implement it with high quality have students that just did better. They had better quality relationships, they make better decisions, and they performed better academically.

Terry: And talking about emotional intelligence, you talk about a blueprint that RULER has evolved that helps foster empathy, and I think our listeners would be very interested in that.

Marc: Yeah, the blueprint is our tool for interpersonal problem solving. And when we're challenged emotionally it's usually that we're not by ourselves. It's usually someone says something or we thought they said something that triggered us. And often times we don't take our meta-moment, as I mentioned earlier, to manage our emotion effectively. We'll behave in a way that's not helpful, or the other person does. And we at this school basically allow youths and adults to think through the situation. And then, most importantly, think about the other person's perspective. What that means is it's not just about how I'm feeling; it's about how the other

person is feeling. And when we recognize how other people feel based on the way we behave, we often can build more empathy and learn from others.

Terry: Now say that I work with a school and I've heard about RULER. How do I get started with the program?

Marc: Well, what typically happens for us is a decision maker works with our center to complete a needs and resources and assessment. What is the school like? What is the district like? What are their needs? And then we build the proposal for them, based on what we learned and what their needs are to help get that leadership training, and get the professional development that they need to do the work well.

Terry: Now have a lot of your involvements been in primary or secondary schools? Where are you seeing the most traction with this?

Marc: For many years we were really rolling out RULER in K-8. And over the last two years we have done quite a lot of work in the preschool and high school area. And so we're still actually in the middle of developing and refining our preschool and high school models. But the K-8 is pretty solid.

Terry: So if I'm a student, what might be the first thing I experience? Say I'm in primary; say I'm a first-grader. What might I experience on the other side of RULER? How would I be approached and taught about social and emotional learning?

Marc: The first thing that's happened in that school is they develop what's called The Emotional Intelligence Charter. And what that is, is basically an agreement between and among teacher and students about the kind of experiences that they want to have in their classroom. So we start with faculty and then it goes to the classroom. But as a first grade student you would be essentially asked, how do you want to feel each day of school? How do you want to feel when you walk into the building, how you want to feel in class, how do you want to feel at recess, lunch? And the kids will work together to describe those feelings. And then they would pick a list of maybe the top five.

And then kids are asked, very simply, what needs to happen for you to feel this way? So they're looking at the behaviors that they and their colleagues, or peers I should say, in this situation, could engage in so that those feelings are actualized.

And then they are also asked to think about the way that they can help when things don't go right, when you break the charter. What are the effective ways that they think would work when someone breaks the charter, or when they don't feel the way they said they were going to feel?

Terry: So this is a very much something that someone commits to on an intellectual and emotional level when they're presented and they sign a charter that says they'll participate in learning about their and other social and emotional capabilities.

Marc: Yes, it's a commitment. It's about building community, right? It's saying what's important about the charter is that it moves away from having like rules that are very traditional, right? Keep your hands to yourself! No speaking out of turn! Those are very top-down, and we want children to generate the behavior that they think are most important to have a healthy climate, so they are actively participating and involved in the creation of the charter.

Terry: Oh, I see. And so then you would have as many different charters then, I guess, as you would have people forming them?

Marc: Yes, every classroom is a little different, and they get more sophisticated as the kids get older.

Terry: And what are some of the boilerplate elements you're finding that, say, primary school charters include?

Marc: They typically say they want to feel respected at the upper elementary level. They want to feel valued. They want to feel supported, engaged. So they are typically things about their basic needs being met, like valued and supported, something around the classroom climate. They want to be engaged.

Terry: Do you get any pushback from more “traditional people” that this maybe has an aspect of something that's unproven or frivolous to it? I mean, how do you combat that sort of reactionary thinking?

Marc: Well, I just go right to the data. For me, what our research shows is that, A, this works. But also there's the basic research on the role of emotional intelligence that kids like. We know pretty definitively that kids who have more developed emotional intelligence skills are healthier, happier, and more productive. So to me it's kind of like a no-brainer.

Terry: Is there a takeaway that you would like to leave with educators out there who might be listening?

Marc: Yes, they can certainly visit our website, which is just ei.yale.edu. Secondly, my big take home is that until children feel positively in school, so they have positive emotions, all the standardized curriculum is not going to get implemented the way it's intended, because kids are always going to want to learn and be in class if they feel safe and valued and supported. So our feelings are that feelings come first, and then the academic piece comes second.

Terry: Well, that is certainly a refreshing change in orientation from what I remember going to high school in the '70s or grade school in the '60s. I mean, you weren't polled for your feelings. That's for sure.

Marc: Yeah.

Terry: Well, thank you very much, Marc. I appreciate the interview today, and we certainly wish you and everyone at Yale great success with your work in emotional intelligence.

Marc: I appreciate that.

Terry: All right.