



Peter Comrie Interview Transcript

JO 0:17

Hey, Jo here. Thanks for joining me and Peter Comrie from Full Spectrum Leadership. We're exploring the role of resilience in the mental health of individuals, families, workplaces, and communities. Peter is an industrial psychologist and leadership coach who calls himself a human capital specialist. We'll dig into that a little later. He is also a trusted friend and valued mentor, who's taught me much about resilience in my personal and professional lives. Welcome, Peter, and thanks so much for being here.

PETER 0:53

Joanne, I cannot tell you how a pleasure it is for me to hang out with you today. So thank you.

JO 1:00

I know resilience means different things, to different people, at different times in their lives. But let's start by you giving us an overview of the concept.

PETER 1:10

Well Jo, it's one of the most misunderstood things in our mental health arena. While it's a really nice catchphrase to be resilient or develop resilience. But very few people actually take the time to dig into what the understanding of it around is, where it comes from, what it means in our world, what it means to us individually.

Just put it in this frame, if I may, for this conversation, and we can always stretch it out a little bit later as well. Resilience is the result of being mindful. Why do we need it in our society today? Because there are so many things, Joanne, that are completely out of our control. And one of the references I use in my practice is Jessop's Theory of Control. And that is this, there are three things in Jessop's theory. Number one, things that we have complete and total, no control over at all. Number two, things that we have a little control over. And number three, things that we have complete and total control over.

Now where would you think about 95% of the population spend more than 80% of their time? In the top one and two, and totally neglect the things that we are in complete control over. And if we want to get a handle on the importance of resilience, it's understanding and developing an awareness and a mindfulness, to spend our time, our incredible valuable life in the areas that we have complete control over.

To reference this, go back to Charles Darwin for a moment. And really no one argues with Charles, it's like trying to argue with Albert, kind of silly if you do. Darwin said this, "It's not the fittest of the species that survives, it's the one that can adapt the best." And if we use the awareness and the mindfulness

around say Jessop's Theory of Control, then say well, okay, if I choose to focus my attention on the things I'm in control of, one, I learn to become more adaptable. Because I'm focusing my attention on the things I have control over. And as a consequence of that learning to be adaptable, resilience is the automatic outcome, it just automatically rises.

Now, as you've heard me say many times in our relationship, we're the only mammal on the planet that functions from choice and not from instinct. Everything we do is based on the choice, everything we do. So let's come back to see things that we are in complete control over. We are in control of what we choose to feel. And I've heard all the arguments in my career. Well, you made me feel. No I didn't. We choose how we feel.

Number two, we choose what we think. And I've heard again all the debate. Well, you made me think. Anyone that's in relationship has heard out at least once in their life. No, I didn't make you think anything. That's a choice.

And the third one is we're responsible for how we choose to behave. And I've heard all the arguments as have you. Well, you made me do. No I didn't. You chose to do that. And we only choose to do the things, Jo, that we believe serve us the best. In spite of all of the evidence to the contrary, we still choose to do that. Now, resilience, or the lack of resilience is the natural outcropping of how we choose to feel, how we choose to think, and how we choose to behave.

JO 4:35

You talked about becoming more adaptable. Can you tell us what being more adaptable looks like and the role of resilience in that?

PETER 4:45

Joanne, it's a lovely and never-ending conversation. It is coming back to what I premised earlier, focusing on the things that we can control in our lives, and there's lots and lots of things we have complete and total control over. So one of the things that's in our face right now, COVID. Now there is a big bucket of stuff right now that everyone is putting a lot of stuff into, PTSD, the rampant episodes of PTSD, epidemic proportions by the way. Use of the crisis hotlines are through the roof, suicide issues looming larger, big changes in movement in the employment arena, and the Human Resources arena, which is massive. And I'll give you some examples of that later. But it's having an impact.

Things are going to be different, of that we know. Many people are holding on and have a false sense of comfort in that they think it's going to return to what we thought was normal. It isn't, it's going to be different. So, the example I used in a class just this morning, is this. If we want to appreciate how things change in our life, we will all agree intellectually, Jo, that the only thing that we all have in common is that we all have to deal with change, every single one of us. Yet it's the thing most of us resist the most.

There's an enormous resistance to change. But if we want to sort of adapt and get a little more closer, and deepen our understanding of the impact, and consistency, and ubiquitousness about change, go in nature. Nature shows us every moment we choose to focus on it, that things are going to change. And it brings out the impermanent nature of everything. And I said to my class this morning, that nature doesn't love anything so much that it won't change it. Nature doesn't love anything so much that it will not change it, it changes everything.

So in learning to become adaptable to the conditions and circumstance that we all have to deal with is first reconciling, that the only constant that we all have to deal with is change. And once we understand that we are resistant to that and work on ways to get over it and accept the nature of what nature is telling us, then we move into a case of becoming more adaptable to the normal things. We learn to be a little more patient. We learn to be a little more accommodating, a little gentler. We say because what am I holding on to when nature is telling me that it's going to change in the next few minutes anyway?

JO 7:24

Peter, are you comfortable sharing an example of resilience in your own life?

PETER 7:29

Oh absolutely, absolutely Joanne. As you know, 10 years ago, I lost my youngest son and his fiancée in a boating accident. And immediately upon being notified that the kids had got killed, I was driving and my former wife who had notified me of it said pull over. And I pulled over, and she told me what had happened. And two things that I had to address immediately sitting at the side of the road. Number one was impotence. Because there's nothing I could do. I'm naturally a fixer, I grew up on a farm. And my work of over 45 years now has been, I'm a fixer. I tend to lean to that. But there's nothing I can do. So I had to deal with the issue of being feeling impotent. And I know full well as a consequence of my upbringing and my training, that I'm not anywhere near as impotent as I sometimes think I am.

So, this is where that whole truth comes in. Because one of the greatest positionalities for really understanding what resilience is, is telling ourselves the truth, like what is really true. And the more truths that we establish and validate, the more resilient we become to everything else that's trying to get our attention. Because we've got that little filter that runs through, when I hear something is that the truth, or can I validate it? How does it fit me, and what do I now choose to do with it?

So the second thing I had to deal with on that day 10 years ago was, I know everything in life is temporary. I grew up on a farm. I appreciate the impermanent nature of all of life. All through my studies, I learned that from learning legend and mythology from Marcus Aurelius back two and a half thousand years ago, all the way up to 2021. And I had to make a decision, because I know we're the only mammal on the planet that functions from choice and not from instinct. I had to make a choice. Do I choose to go to grief, or do I choose to go to celebration? I had to realize that my youngest son at 33 years old, had lived 100% of his life in 33 years. So you've known me long enough. Where did I go? Did I go to grief, or did I go to celebration?

JO 9:54

You went to celebration?

PETER 9:56

Exactly. Now it doesn't eliminate grief or the grieving process Jo. But what it did is it gave me tools to manage my grief through celebration. Because I learned that if I focused on the grief, that was all about me. If I focused on the celebration, it was all about them. And appreciating then, the absolute abject feeling of being resilient to the news, and the awareness, and the understanding that I'll never see my son again. But 33 years of great and phenomenal memories of a brilliant young man.

One of the greatest aspects of developing a powerful sense of resilience, one is telling ourselves the truth. Now we're surrounded with, oh I almost swore, I wouldn't do that. But I was tempted to. We're surrounded Joanne with something that's summed up in two words, one begins with B, one begins with

S. And we are inundated by the choice often of our entertainment. The mediums that we're inflicted upon, that are all meant to disempower us, to show us that we have really no power. And I pointed out to my class this morning, most people are entertained into numbness.

So I'll go back to Marcus Aurelius, if I may. I learned this as a student. Marcus Aurelius had two brilliant words. He said, he would remind his people of this, memento mori, which means remember you will die. But he always had the caveat afterwards, don't forget to live. We'll all agree, Joanne, that none of us are going to get off this boat alive. And it's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when. So we're here for this finite period of time, which is really, really incredibly short. Yet, we often make the choice to give up some of that magnificent life that we've got, and waste it on issues that, one, we have no control over, or little control over, and often guised as entertainment. So we're entertained into numbness often.

There are so many things we can choose to help build our own resilience, build our own understanding, build our own level of understanding what truth is, and then walking in the world from that place. And I strongly suggest, sometimes even more than a little strongly suggest to the people that either have the pleasure or displeasure of having to work with me is saying, okay, come on, let's make some decisions here of how we are going to choose to be, and the benefits of what it adds to us, or what it detracts from us.

And if we're going to get through these times Jo, one, as I said, everyone, tell yourself the truth. And sometimes that can be incredibly uncomfortable. And then validate the truth that you've established, how do you validate that it's true for you, and then walking in the world from that place. And it's the walking in the world from that place, Joanne, that develops the muscle. It's not about assuming. It's how do you develop the muscle of awareness? And how does it impact our life on a daily basis? And then how do you achieve that?

JO 13:05

So how do individuals develop those muscles? What are the roadblocks and how do we get past them?

PETER 13:12

Take responsibility for the entire life experience? No excuses. So it's advancing the practice of our personal ability to respond. And every single thing that we do, Joanne, or most of the things that we're caused to address is really asking for our response, not our reaction. Now, if you're standing in the middle of the road, and the number 14 bus is coming at you, you don't say, hmm I did I attract this into my life. You get out of the way, you react. The only thing we should really react to something is if something's in danger. And most of the things that we are caused to address is of no danger to us. It can be if we don't get a good handle on it, or a good understanding of it, it can be dangerous to us.

So it's a matter of, again, coming back to that proposition is what's my contract with life. What contract do I make as an individual, of how I choose to show up, each consistently? What's my contract for living? How do I choose to spend my time and my day? As I put out to my class this morning, please take a 90-day media diet. You will get well, things will be better, I promise. It's not a doctor's prescription. It's an idea.

But the wonderful part, what do individuals do? Get into the conversations about what ideas can we work on, that have a positive impact on us as individuals, and then those around us. What can I share? Remember, we come into this life alone, we leave alone. That's just the way life is, we understand that.

It's this magnificent piece between those two dates, that we get to converse with the universe about who we think we really are.

JO 14:54

So what about resilience in families?

PETER 14:57

Same thing, it's just a roll over and only larger because it's all based on example. I will clearly confess, Jo, that in my over 70 years of being around, there's some a couple of things in my past that I wish had never happened. But there's two things I don't do is I don't do guilt and I don't do regret. I do learning. And as a consequence of these experiences, that nothing is ever fatal nor final, but it's always an opportunity to learn. And the whole idea about developing adaptability and resilience in families is what are we learning. Remember Joanne, we're the only mammal on the planet that's designed to learn until the day we die. There's no excuse for not learning.

As you know, I'm a bit of a student. And I constantly have a book management problem, because there's so many things that I'm excited about learning. Even today, I still feel very much like I was as a student in my very young years. Because with all this stuff that's going on, these brilliant, magnificent minds that we're surrounded by who are writing things down. Now we've got podcasts, and videos, and zoom conferences. There is no excuse for not learning, to get to be, and choose to be the very best we can be. And that, when it's a family unit, when it's tied up to learning, trust me, resilience is the automatic result of engaging in that.

JO 16:25

I know you're passionate about resilience in the workplace. So can you tell us a little bit about that, and how businesses can best move forward?

PETER 16:35

Thank you, Joanne. As you know, the bulk of my practice is in industry. Most of my clients are fairly large corporations. Work is something we volunteer for, Jo. Most people think they have to work. Well, that's just response to the economic conditions that we've agreed to be a part of. We all deal with the same economy, so we choose to work. But as I've said to everyone who has ever had the opportunity to work with me, "If you are what you do, when you don't you are, if you are what you do, when you don't you are." That's why I never ever assess anyone based on what they do. What they do pays the rent. Where I'm more interested in is who are they? And who are they bringing to work?

And I discovered many, many years ago, we bring our entire self to work, all our fears, all our misgivings, all our motivation, all our inspirations, all our learning, all our relationships. We bring everything to work. It's part of who we are. How do we then respond to make sure that one, they are feeling the best that they possibly can, doing what they have chosen to do? Hmm, I appreciate that that could in some human resource places, be a little bit of a conflicting idea. If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change. So in my world, if we want a workforce that one is committed to the plan, and the exercise and what we've decided collectively to do, first and foremost, they have to feel good about doing it. Because they're volunteering to do it, you can't legislate that.

So from a cultural standpoint, it's important then if we're going to develop a stronger sense of resiliency to manage all this stuff that we know is going to change in the workplace, as we've seen in the last couple of years, the changes in making people work at home, all the stuff that has come with that, and

we've had and are having phenomenal amount of learning around those issues. But first and foremost, people are not going to give of themselves if they don't feel good about doing it. So it's bringing that pride of personal positionality, always into the working environment and working communications.

A question that I've asked for pretty much my entire career. I've asked this of thousands and thousands of people. Remember the answer to which the question, there's only one word, not a skill testing question? What's the only evidence of life, remember?

JO 19:07

Growth.

PETER 19:08

Growth, thank you. Growth is the only evidence of life. As we build a culture that wants to be resilient, wants to be able to handle change easily, we've got to create circumstances where people get the opportunity to grow. Because growth is the only evidence of life. We know then that bringing these conversations into the workplace, bringing them into the newsletters, having the conferences, having the acknowledgments, all of the stuff that encourage growth, we know then as an organization that's an organic thing, the organization is going to grow because it's truly alive.

JO 19:43

Because this is the HEADS UP Community Mental Health Program, I'm really keen to know how you feel about resilience at the community scale, and how that relates to human capital. And as I said earlier, you call yourself a human capital specialist, how does that all align?

PETER 20:06

Okay, here we are in a beautiful part of the world that we're privileged to be in. We're dealing with an issue that is pretty much worldwide right now, that's impacting every single one of us. I'm not shocked by many things. The choice of human behaviors don't really shock me, because I just accept it and say, what's causing that. But one of the things that we've noticed, and we talked about it in my class this morning, is we're starting to see everyone's getting very tired. Fatigue is setting in. COVID fatigue is a real thing, we're recognizing it. Zoom fatigue is a real thing. People are tired. And what often happens when people are fatigued, Jo, is their normal, good behavior can get compromised, their normal considerations can get compromised.

I watched an argument in a parking lot, two miles from my office this week, that I thought was going to come to blows over a parking spot, in the middle of the day, with two ladies. And they were out and out screaming at each other on who had the right to the parking space. Now, I was with two other people, because we're heading into the bookstore. And we stopped, and I didn't want to hear what they were saying, I just wanted to see the behavior of it. And I thought for a moment, they're going to come to blows, because there was arm swinging and purses going all over the place. And I thought if one of those lands, now we have an assault.

And I'm bringing it up, Jo, because it was just pretty much typical of the result of fatigue. People are tired, they're stretched. And we know that, we can feel that in ourselves, yet we ignore it. And we try to pretend that things are normal, they're not. First and foremost, as we said earlier, tell ourselves the truth. Things are not normal as we've known them, and probably never will be again. They're going to be different. And we have to learn, one, how do I choose to be in this time? And if I choose to be short tempered, and pissed off, and angry at the slightest argument of a parking spot, like give me a break.

Look what happened just a couple of weeks ago, with the transportation issue in British Columbia where we had some washouts. Like literally within 24 hours, the grocery stores were empty. I don't mean of people; I mean of produce. There was that fear-based component. Everybody thought, oh God, I'm going to starve. Hold it, we're not going to starve, okay. Oh my lord, I'm not going to have anything to wipe my bum, wrong. It's because we've lost our imagination, come on.

Yes, does that affect the culture that we're in, the society that were in, we're all part of human capital, every single one of us. The reason I'm human capital specialist is I believe with every fiber of my being, that the most valuable asset a society has, and a company has is it's human capital. And we should always be looking for ways that we get the best return that we can, from the investment we make in our human capital.

JO 23:24

So what I hear you saying Peter is that resilience is not only about a concept or an attitude, it's also about behavior. And those three all are tied up together.

PETER 23:36

I couldn't have said it any better myself, Jo, well done.

JO 23:40

That's a wrap Peter. I can't thank you enough for sharing your insights, your ideas, and your passion for mental health in general, and resilience in particular. To learn more about Peter and his work, visit fullspectrumleadership.com or email peter@fullspectrumleadership.com.

Please visit freshoutlookfoundation.org and sign up for our monthly e-newsletter. And for podcast and blog info as it drops, follow us on Facebook at FreshOutlookFoundation and Twitter at FreshOutlook. So thanks for hanging in with us until the end, and I look forward to connecting with you again soon.