

*LifeCompass Institute for
Character & Leadership
at Montrose School*



STRESS TESTS of Character

DEBORAH FARMER KRIS
KAREN E. BOHLIN, EdD



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Character & Leadership
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LifeCompass Institute for Character & Leadership
Montrose School
29 North Street
Medfield, MA 02052
508.359.2423
www.montroseschool.org/lci



Stress Tests of Character

Using Story to Strengthen Student Motivation & Character
An Online Curriculum Resource for Teachers
Deborah Farmer Kris, EdM and Karen E. Bohlin, EdD

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Introduction

Karen E. Bohlin, EdD

I write this introduction within the backdrop of the global pandemic and unprecedented political division in the United States. The year 2020 will no doubt go down in history for its fair share of stress tests affecting human life, mental health, the economy, political discourse, and more.

Why Focus on “Stress Tests of Character”?

Independent of this current context, students inevitably confront stress in their efforts to achieve, fit in, and manage the academic, social, and emotional ups and downs at school and home. Most young people are already well acquainted with small and large stress tests. They have experienced trepidation before auditioning for a play, trying out for a sport, or standing on the foul line knowing theirs would be the game-deciding shot. Some have lost family members. Some have suffered serious injuries. Some live in unstable economic situations. And every day they come to school and face new fears and challenges, from learning complex math to writing an essay.

The question for those of us who are educators (parents, teachers, school leaders) is what do we do – and who do we *become* – in the face of stress tests? When confronted with challenges, how do we reframe stress as an opportunity for growth? And how do we harness their power for our students, to help them develop the motivation and good habits of character they need to emerge stronger from them?

Why Does Practical Wisdom Matter?

At the heart of navigating stress tests is practical wisdom. Practical wisdom gives us the agility and internal compass to “know what to do when we don’t know what to do.” As our colleagues at the [Jubilee Centre](#) write, “Practical Wisdom forms part of all the other virtues; indeed it constitutes the overarching meta-virtue necessary for good character.” This is especially important when our emotions are hot, when pressure is high, or when we find ourselves out of our depth. Practical wisdom is what helps us to press pause, so we can create space between our first reaction – which is often both understandable and raw – and a considered, thoughtful response.

Confronted with a stress test, sometimes we need time, study, and wise mentoring before we can respond well. Sometimes we need rest, exercise, and meditation. Depending on the circumstances, often we need some combination of the above. Once we calm the amygdala, we can jumpstart our prefrontal cortex and start thinking through next steps. We can ask ourselves: *What am I aiming at? Who do I want to be? What kind of response aligns with my true aim?* When we step away from our initial reaction, we give ourselves permission to reflect, [recalibrate, and choose a more thoughtful response](#).

Why Story?

Stories offer accessible and memorable examples of practical wisdom in action. While it may seem like reason ought to be our guide in moments of stress and temptation, research shows that the heart and the imagination are powerful motivators (Bohlin, 2005). Who and what we love affects what we aim at and the choices we make. Who and what we desire gives shape to our vision, our *why*. Where does this motivation come from? Family, mentors, friends, teachers, experiences – and from **stories**, fiction, nonfiction and [family stories](#).

How are stories helpful in navigating stress tests? In his book, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) explains, “We can only answer the question ‘what am I to do [with my life]?’ if we can answer the question ‘of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” (216). Or, put another way, whose story inspires me? And, who do I aspire to be? The stories we live and share are powerful teachers. The students in our care all have resilience stories of their own – moments they faced challenges and grew stronger as a result. We can encourage them to reflect on, write, and tell these stories. And in our classrooms, we can offer them stories of mathematicians, scientists, artists, historical figures, literary characters, and others to give them powerful insight into how individuals surmount ordinary and extraordinary stress tests and learn to flourish.

Moreover, we [retain stories better](#) than we retain factual information. Why? Because we are [hard-](#)

[wired](#) to [remember stories](#), and these stories can be both instructive and [motivating](#). Emily Dickinson, for example, [greatly admired](#) English writers George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Browning’s verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856) was one of Dickinson’s favorite fictitious works; the story of Aurora’s life as a poet captivated Dickinson and influenced the images she used in her own poetry. Dickinson also kept several of Eliot’s novels and poems in her collection.

My colleagues (Gregory, 2009; Harrison and Carr, 2015) and I (Bohlin, 2005) have written extensively about the power of story – purposefully engaged – to shape the moral imagination and aspirations of readers. Abraham Lincoln carried Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* with him as a faithful traveling companion. He read and reread the Scottish play to remind himself of the dangers of unbridled ambition in a leader. Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani activist who stood up for her right to education against the Taliban, is another leader who keeps stories close for guidance. She [names](#) *The Alchemist* as one of her favorites, calling it “hopeful and inspiring” and adding that the “story tells you that you should believe in yourself and continue your journey.”

How Can This Resource Help Educators?

Stress Tests of Character is a resource that is designed to expand your toolbox and complement the academic curriculum. *Stress Tests of Character* helps teachers and students develop the habits they need to regain their bearings in the face of stress, so they can reframe challenges as opportunities for growth and navigate them with agility and courage.

All of these materials are grounded in Aristotelian virtue ethics and offer practical wisdom for helping students develop the character strengths they need to flourish in the face of adversity.

The *Stress Tests of Character* eResource offers:

1: Practical resources and ideas for weaving stress test stories into your curriculum including:

- [8 Ways to Use Storytelling in the Classroom to Foster Character Strengths](#)
- [Guiding Questions for Teachers](#)
- [Finding Stress Test Stories](#)
- [How Stories Support Academic Tenacity](#)
- [Storytelling in Science: Books That Connect Students With Scientists’ Struggles](#)

2. An expository Q&A and a robust bibliography that educators can use for their own professional development, addressing: What do we mean by “stress tests of character? What is practical wisdom, and how can it help us navigate stress tests? How can we learn to respond, instead of react, to stressors – and make choices that strengthen our character and reflect who we want to be? Why is story a powerful tool for strengthening student motivation, tenacity and resilience?

3. Sample lesson plans that teachers can use in the middle or high school classroom. This resource is *not* a stand-alone curriculum; however, it does offer lessons that teachers can draw on and use as models to develop their own. These lessons include:

- [Which Character Strengths Support Academic Achievement?](#)
- [How Do You Build Good Habits or Strengths of Character?](#)
- [What is a Stress Test of Character?](#)
- [The Courage of Ruby Bridges](#)
- [The Resilience of Eleanor Roosevelt](#)
- [The Struggles of Mathematicians and Scientists](#)

The online version of this toolkit is replete with live links. In this PDF version, the underlined phrases will indicate where there is more material to access online. Whichever version you use, we hope you find it helpful. We also invite you to tell us how these resources are working for you and to share your own Stress Tests lessons and resources for our consideration. This will allow us to include additional lessons highlighting stress tests and resilience stories in math, science, English, history, language study and the arts. Please submit your contributions via email to lci@montroseschool.org.

On behalf of my colleagues at the *LifeCompass* Institute and Montrose School, I want to thank James Arthur and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues for the invitation to partner in the development of this instructional e-Resource and Beth Purvis at the Kern Family Foundation whose intellectual energy and generous support made this project possible. I also want to thank our friend and mentor, Steve Tigner, who introduced us to the power of stress tests of character; Deborah Farmer Kris, whose leadership on this project has been inspiring; our faculty colleagues at Montrose School whose contributions and comments made this resource more robust; Gabrielle Landry for her excellent editorial support; and Erin O’Brien and Jane Gianino, whose design expertise have made both the print and online versions beautiful and accessible.

Helping Students Navigate Stress Tests: 5 Q&A's

#1: What is a Stress Test of Character?

We all face stress tests of character. In life, challenges are inevitable. How we respond to them is a matter of choice.

As philosopher Dr. Steve Tigner wrote, stress tests “put individual characters on trial in their most revealing ways, showing – or betraying – what they are really like . . . [They are] the tests of heroes.” The choices we make during difficult moments reveal a lot about our strengths, our struggles, and our priorities. These stress points also highlight the practical need for courage, integrity, tenacity, resilience, respect, and compassion. These strengths, or virtues, help us withstand the storms of life.

But it isn't easy. When we are under pressure – when our brain is flooded with stress hormones – we often experience the biological drive to fight, flee, or freeze. In these moments, it's easy to fall back on old habits, to overreact, or to give in to instinct. While we may not have control over the emotion that washes over us in a challenging moment, we do have the ability to choose what we do next.

How we pause, reflect, and respond to stress can give us a chance to grow – and, in turn, this growth gives meaning to challenges. When students learn how to navigate stress tests with courage and tenacity, it allows them to say:

- That was a tough project, but I persevered.
- It would have been easy to cheat on that assignment, but I chose integrity.
- I made it through that difficult situation;
- I am more resilient than I realized.
- I chose to be kind even though the other person didn't make it easy.
- I was scared, but I chose to be brave because it was the right thing to do.

A clear vision of who we want to be, how we want to treat others, and what we hope to accomplish helps us respond more purposefully to everyday challenges. As the Cheshire Cat told *Alice in Wonderland*, if you don't know “where you want to get to... then it doesn't much matter which way you go.” It prompts the question, “What actions can I take that align with my values?”

Adolescence is a time marked by stress tests. Why? Because change – even positive change – is inherently stressful, and teenagers' lives are filled with change! Their brains and bodies are growing, their social lives are evolving, and they face choices about college, job training, current events, and their economic future. As we talk about helping them develop character, we must also look at how they deal with stress.

Stress tests look different for each person. The same external situation will evoke various first reactions: excitement or fear, hope or dread, joy or disgust. Students will have different emotional reactions to similar academic and social pressures. One student may tremble at the thought of giving an oral presentation while another thrives on speaking in front of peers.

Here's the good news: these first reactions are not good or bad, right or wrong. They just are. For the most part, we cannot control the obstacles we will be asked to confront; many stressors are simply out of our control. And that can feel scary to teens. What we can choose is how we respond to these challenges. Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Dr. Viktor Frankl [wrote](#), “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” But teenagers need support as they develop courage, resilience, and practical wisdom.

Adolescent psychologist Dr. Lisa Damour uses the metaphor of exercise to help teens reframe their understanding of stress: To develop physical strength, she says, you have to slowly push your levels of physical endurance, building up strength through resistance training. [In other words](#), “you should see [a challenge] as an extraordinary weight training program for your mind. You are going to walk out of it tougher and stronger than you have ever been.”

That's an empowering message for students: stretching to face challenges is part of how humans develop strength.

In an interview with Deborah Farmer Kris, Damour continues, “Brave is a positive word – it's something we aspire to be. Built into the word is the understanding that the person is scared and yet they are doing something anyway. Scared is here to stay. Anxiety is part of life. It's not our job to vanquish these feelings. It's our job to develop the resources we need to march forward anyway.”



#2: What Character Strengths Help Us Navigate Stress Tests?

Virtues are strengths that help us make wise choices – choices that will help us flourish at home, at school, and in our communities.

In our beautiful, diverse, and often tumultuous world, there is remarkable consensus about the strengths of character – or virtues – we admire in others and strive to develop in ourselves.

Virtues that Support Academic Excellence	Virtues that Strengthen Relationships	Virtues that Help Us Navigate Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tenacity• Attention• Thoroughness• Curiosity• Intellectual honesty & humility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Empathy• Compassion• Kindness• Respect• Gratitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Courage• Self-Control• Responsibility• Integrity• Hope

One virtue that is particularly vital to withstanding challenges is courage. Courage doesn't mean we do not experience fear or anxiety. In fact, fear and stress are uncomfortable yet vital reactions because they offer data about what we are experiencing in our environment – including physical and psychological dangers. So courage is not a denial of fear, which is probably there for a good reason, but the decision to have the right response anyway. When we are brave, we acknowledge our fear, but we also look beyond ourselves and weigh the other factors involved in order to make the right decision.

So how do we develop courage and other character traits? Practice. Practice. Practice.

Two thousand years ago, the philosopher Aristotle wrote, “We learn by doing. [We] become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts . . . brave by doing brave acts.”

Here's the thing: virtues such as courage or integrity are not flat and static. There is not a cookie-cutter “brave” response to every challenging situation. Courage will not look the same in every situation, and it takes practice and experience to habitually respond to challenges bravely.

The science around resilience (i.e. the capacity to recover from difficulties), echoes the importance of practice and highlights the need for adults to support children in developing this capacity. According to [research](#) out of Harvard's Center for the Developing Child, “Resilience can be built; it's not an innate trait or a resource that can be used up.” They describe resilience as emerging from an “interplay between internal disposition and external experience” and note that: “[R]esilience is shaped throughout life by the accumulation of experiences – both good and bad – and the continuing development of adaptive coping skills connected to those experiences. What happens early may matter most, but it is never too late to build resilience.” Likewise, it is never too late to strengthen courage, compassion, and other virtues that help us thrive in the face of challenges.

#3: How Do We Coach Students Through Stress Tests?

One caring adult. According to [research](#) on childhood adversity, “every child who winds up doing well has had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive adult.” As Dr. Marc Brackett, Director of the Center for Emotional Intelligence, [said](#), “Research shows that the mere presence of a caring and loving adult is a co-regulation strategy. If our children believe in their soul that the person they are with cares about them and is there for them – even if that person doesn't say anything – that's a strategy.”

Teachers can serve as caring mentors who help students develop the internal strength and skills they need to face challenges. And when teachers expand their toolkit of practical strategies for integrating character education into their classrooms, their influence can be amplified.

When navigating challenges, students and adults need practical wisdom: the ability to assess a situation and respond well in the moment. Practical wisdom requires the head and the heart. We can desire to be compassionate, but we still need to use our brains to determine what a compassionate response will look like in a particular situation. After all, a toddler might think it's kind to share a cookie with a newborn – but that's not good for the newborn!

As our colleagues at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues [write](#), “What is significant about the practical moral wisdom . . . is that the deliberation it requires is highly context-sensitive and therefore not readily susceptible to codification in the form of the general rules characteristic of traditional professional codes.”



To paraphrase Aristotle, virtue helps us aim correctly, and practical wisdom helps us move toward that target. Aristotle also offered this helpful framework: every virtue, or strength, is found at the high point between two extremes. For example, true courage lies between cowardice or emotional paralysis (too much fear) on the one hand, and recklessness (not

enough appropriate caution) on the other. Similarly, hope can be eroded by both despair and wishful thinking.

This is a familiar concept for students. Even young children know that Goldilocks encounters “too hot, too cold, too hard, too soft” as she searches for “just right.”

Depending on our personality, temperament, and prior life experiences, we all tend to initially gravitate toward one extreme or another. In the face of conflict, is our first instinct to rage or retreat? In expressing difficult feelings, do we gravitate toward passive or aggressive communication? Our gut-level response to a situation is our “first reaction.”

Here’s a powerful message for students: when you encounter a challenge or opportunity, *you are not bound to your first reaction*. It’s healthy and normal to feel stress, but that feeling doesn’t need to rule you. You can own your response to a situation when you:

- Recognize your first, often instinctive, reaction
- Pause to reflect on the situation, remembering what you are aiming for, and who you aspire to be.
- Recalibrate and respond in a way that matches your vision, your whys, a set of capabilities that can help us respond and adapt to adversity in healthy ways.”

This is practical wisdom in action.

So how do we bridge the gap between our initial reaction and a thoughtful response that matches who we are and who we aspire to be? First, we need to open up the conversation. Human beings are “[hardwired to connect](#),” and teens crave mentors who provide compassion, guidance, vision, and inspiration. Dr. Jack Shonkoff, director of Harvard University’s Center for the Developing Child, [notes](#): “Resilience depends on supportive, responsive relationships and mastering a set of capabilities that can help us respond and adapt to adversity in healthy ways.”



When students are under stress, we can provide them with empathy and help them pause, reflect, and think through clarifying questions such as:

- How am I feeling right now? Why?
- What do I know? What do I need to know?

- What do I want the outcome of the situation to be?
- What help do I need?
- What is one step I can take right now that moves me closer to my goal?

As Dr. Susan David from Harvard University explains in her book *Emotional Agility*, “emotions can give you tremendous data.”

When we have a strong emotional reaction, reflection can help us pay attention to what it might be communicating. For example, the feeling of loneliness may tell you that you crave connection – but there are lots of ways to seek out social connection, some healthy and some destructive. As Susan David cautions, emotions offer “data not direction.” Feeling fear or anger does not mean we need to fight or flee. Feeling angry with a friend doesn’t mean we need to yell at them. Feeling nervous about taking a test doesn’t mean we need to skip class that day. But when we are scared or confused, it’s easy to fall back on old habits or give into instinct.

Dr. David suggests that when you have the internal thought, “I want to do this but I’m scared,” take one small step that moves you toward your goal. After all, she writes, “Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is fear walking.”

When we reflect, we can evaluate our reactions and take small, deliberate steps to move us in the direction we want to go. If I want to take better care of my physical wellness, what’s one step I can take, right now? If I am overwhelmed by demands, what small changes can I make to prioritize my time? If I am in conflict with a friend, what might help open up lines of communication?

According to research, giving students opportunities to articulate a strong vision about who they want to be and what difference they want to make in the world is a protective factor. Teachers and mentors can help scaffold these moments. In a [study](#) out of Stanford University, middle school students were asked to reflect and write about something that truly mattered to them, and they engaged in this exercise during a typically stressful point in the academic year. Students who participated in this exercise saw significant academic gains as compared to their peers who did not engage in this reflection. This was particularly true for at-risk students. [Similarly](#), first-generation college students who were asked to write about the three values that were most important to them also saw academic gains.

Think about it this way: students spend hours every day at school. The environment inevitably shapes them. Week after week, year after year, they are developing habits and ways of being – but are those habits helping them flourish or flounder?

The relationships we build, the lessons we teach, the conversations we have, the tone we help set in the hallways and lunchroom, the policies we enact – all of these communicate something to students about what’s important to us.

- Are we communicating, clearly, that our most important goal is to help them thrive academically and personally?
- Do we look for research-based tools to help them become

more resilient, responsible, courageous, and compassionate human beings?

- Do we model for them our belief that the brain is malleable and responsive to effort, and we can all develop habits that will help us flourish?
- As the mentors in their lives, do we believe that character development is a lifelong enterprise and that it is never too late to build stronger, healthier habits?

As educators, we will have moments of success and moments that feel like failures as we face life’s stress tests of character with as much grace as we can muster. When we have a vision of who we want to be as educators, we can navigate challenges and find the resilience to get back up and take one more step forward – for the greater good of our students.

#4: Why Are Stories Powerful Teaching Tools?

In addition to modeling and coaching practical wisdom, we can use the curriculum to help students navigate stress tests of character. And stories are a vibrant tool. Why? We learn more about character from a life than a lesson. Character education is not about teaching a stale set of rules that students should follow in a rote, dispassionate way. True character education is multidimensional and dynamic – sensitive to both the context and complexity of human experience.

That’s why storytelling is such a powerful pedagogical tool. Stories capture lives.

Everyone struggles, even those people we look up to in admiration. Students can gain valuable insights by reflecting on challenging moments in the lives of literary characters, historical figures, mathematicians, scientists, and artists. These stories also vividly show what virtues look like in action – and the courage and practical wisdom required to make strong choices under difficult circumstances.



Our brains love stories because

- stories are appealing, motivating, memorable;
- stories help us develop a vision of who we want to be and how we want to interact with others;
- stories give us an opportunity to see how other people nav-

igate life’s challenges for better or worse – particularly their stress tests of character;

- stories help students see the scientists, mathematicians, and the people who occupy their history books as real people who struggled with internal and external challenges, just like we all do;
- stories can vividly show what virtues and habits look like in the real world – and highlight the practical wisdom required to make strong choices under difficult circumstances.

We are wired for story. As [Dr. Greg Marshall](#) writes, “For human beings, the pull of stories is primal. What oxygen is to the body, stories are to our emotions and imagination. Story is concrete, not abstract...It is the story’s concreteness that activates the vicarious imagination – our ability to experience the thoughts, actions, and emotions of others as if they were our own.” In this way, he writes, they “extend an invitation” for us to become more wise and compassionate.

In her book, *The Influential Mind*, neuroscientist Tali Sharot argues that story is one of the most powerful influences on our behavior. Facts alone, [she writes](#), “overlook the core of what makes us human; our fears, our desires, our prior beliefs. To make a change we must tap into those motives, presenting information in a frame that emphasizes common beliefs, triggers hope and expands people’s sense of agency.”

Teens crave role models and exemplars, and when we offer them diverse stories, they can start to see themselves in the narrative.

For example, after researching the life story of African-American NASA researcher Katherine Johnson (whose story was told in the book and film *Hidden Figures*) one young woman [wrote](#), “I want to be an astrophysicist, and sometimes I feel alone in my passion. Knowing someone else like Katherine Johnson is in the math world made such a big impact on me.” Johnson’s story taught her, “There is an objective to life: there is a reason you are here, and you have to find it.”

Psychiatrist Jeff Kotler [notes](#) that from infancy, “we learn to make sense of the world, as well as to prepare for life’s challenges, through the listening to and telling of stories.” He writes:

What is a story that changed your life? Think of a seminal story you’ve heard or watched that had such a strong impact on your life that the effects still resonate within you today. Think of a character from a story who so intimately inhabits your life that he or she feels as real to you as anyone you know personally. Consider a story you tell about yourself that holds within it a sacred and precious quality that you value most. And most importantly, recall an instance in which you faced a difficult challenge, disappointment, or crisis and you managed to recover and become stronger as a result: What story did you tell yourself (and others) about this experience that featured you in a heroic role rather than as a victim?

When we read about the lives of people we admire, he says, “they feel like intimate friends with whom we feel closely connected.” And every student could use a few more friends!

#5: How Can We Use Stories In the Classroom to Help Students Navigate Stress Tests of Character?

On our [Stress Tests of Character](#) website, we have pulled together several resources and a few sample lesson plans to help you think about how to integrate stories into your classroom – as one tool for helping students navigate the stress tests of character. But you can also ask yourself these questions: *Who are the women and men in my field who have inspired me? What stories have I encountered that have influenced my understanding of the field?*

After you identify a “stress test story,” engage students in critical thinking with questions like these:

1. Context: What is the context of this story?

What internal and external factors contributed to this moment/situation?

2. First Reactions: Imagine you were in this situation. What first reactions would be understandable under the circumstances? What emotions

might a person experience?

3. Possible Responses: What are the array of possible choices this person had in front of them – and what would be the tential consequences of each?

4. Motivation: What might be guiding this individual's decision making and why?

5. Character Strengths: In this situation, what virtues/strengths are being tested? What virtues/strengths would they need to make the best possible decision?

6. Actual Responses: What did the person in the story ultimately choose to do? What does this suggest about his/her character? Who was affected? In hindsight, what do we know now that might have been valuable insight to this person?

As you explore stress test stories, the people your students meet will become points of reference for future discussions in the classroom – and will inspire students when they face their own stress tests of character.



Lesson Plan #1 Which Character Strengths Support Academic Achievement?

This lesson can be used early in the year in any class or subject to help frame and articulate the character strengths that contribute to success in your class and in professions related to this subject.

Objective

To help students understand the internal strengths required to 1) become an expert in the field you teach and 2) navigate the stress tests of character that come with mastering a subject.

Opener

Share a video, story, or image of an accomplishment related to the field you teach. For example, in science you might show the launch of a space shuttle. In music, you might play a clip from a symphony. In English, you might show a book that has influenced people around the world. In athletics, you might show an incredible race that required perseverance. In math, you might show a proof that took years to prove or a bridge that required extraordinary planning to build. In history, you might show a picture of a human making a courageous choice (such as Ruby Bridges walking to school under police guard).

Tip: If, as a teacher, you choose something that inspires you, your students will sense your curiosity and wonder.

Activity

Think: Using sticky notes or small pieces of paper, ask students to write down the human qualities required to accomplish the feat they just witnessed or discussed. What internal strengths did they possess that empowered them to build this building, write this book, lead this movement, make this scientific discovery, etc. Put one word on each small piece of paper.

Pair: In partners or small groups, have students share their observations. Have them group together words that are the same or similar.

Share: As a class, make a list of the most common strengths, or virtues, that emerged from the small group discussion. Your list might include words such as

- Courage/Bravery
- Attentiveness/Focus
- Tenacity/Perseverance
- Organization
- Thoroughness
- Internal motivation
- Curiosity
- Creativity
- Humility

- Empathy/Compassion
- Hope
- Resilience
- Responsibility
- Patience
- Integrity

Reflection

Written Reflection or Journaling

Discussion Question: Look at the list, adding more words as you see fit, and ask: So what does this tell us about what it takes to become a strong scientist, mathematician, writer, citizen, artist, etc.?

Written Reflection or Journaling

Look at the list again. What are one or two strengths that you currently possess that can help you in this class?



What are one or two strengths you want to develop?



What small steps can you take to grow stronger in these areas?



What help might you need from your teacher?



Lesson Plan #2

How Do You Build Good Habits or Strengths of Character?

Objective

During Lesson #1, we identified habits & strengths that support academic flourishing, such as courage, tenacity, resilience, attentiveness, curiosity, and patience. This lesson helps students understand that habit formation takes time and effort – and is worth their focus and attention.

Opener

Return to the inspiring image or story from “Introductory Lesson #1” (or choose a new one). Did the people involved wake up one morning and say, “Today I’m going to build the Golden Gate Bridge” or “Today I am going to write lead a march on Washington”? What leads them to that point?

Sometimes we might wish we had a magic wand. We could wave it at homework and POOF, the homework would complete itself. Or wave at our feet and POOF, we would be an expert soccer player. Or wave at my computer and POOF, a perfect essay would appear. But the “good stuff” isn’t just the finished product – it’s how we get there. When we talk about amazing human accomplishments, we don’t just admire the book or discovery or structure, we are awed by people’s strength, grit, and grace along the way. We admire the character of the people who make a difference in the world. The habits they practice as they navigate stress tests in their work often reveal more about their character than the accomplishments themselves.

Activity

Another word for character strengths is “good habits.” What exactly is a habit? Let’s brainstorm. Have students make a T-Chart about what they know and what they want to know about what a habit is, how they are formed, and how they are helpful or unhelpful for our development. Alternative: give students sticky notes to write down ideas and populate a large T-Chart on the board.

What I know...

What I want to know...

Have students share their ideas and review some of the common themes and questions. Students will likely point out that habits can be both good and bad.

Ask: What are some good habits – habits that improve your life and help you be a better person? What are some unhelpful habits – habits that do not help you thrive as a student or a person?

Introduce HABITS Acronym to communicate five key ideas.

H

H: Happy and Healthy
Habits can be good, bad or neutral. Good habits help you thrive. In this class, we will work on building good academic habits that will support your growth.

A

A: Ask Aristotle
The Greek philosopher said, “We learn by doing.” You don’t learn to play the piano by thinking about pianos – your fingers have to play the scales over and over until finger location becomes a habit.

Likewise, if you want to be more courageous, you have to practice taking risks that move you toward positive goals.

B

B: Bite-Sized Beginnings
Break your goals into bite-sized chunks. If you take small positive steps you every day, you will build the strong habits of character you need to flourish at school and in the rest of your life.

I

I: I Can
Remind yourself, “I can change. I can grow.” [I can learn math. I can learn to write. I can become a strong reader . . .]. Our brains are constantly growing and changing – our neural pathways are malleable and responsive to effort. This mindset gives us the motivation we need to pursue our goals, even when we encounter challenges.

T

T: Time
It takes weeks (or months!) for an action to become a habit. So be patient with yourself. After a while, you won’t have to think about whether or not you are to proofread your work or organize your materials or turn off distractions or treat your classmates with respect. It’ll be a habit. When you act in a certain way over and over again, it becomes a mental routine that you do automatically, like brushing your teeth.

Reflection

What is one academic habit that would help you find success in this class? What’s one action you can take this week to build that habit?

Lesson Plan #3:

What is a Stress Test of Character?

Objective

To help students understand that stress is a normal human response – and the choices we make when we encounter stressful circumstances help build our character.

Opener

Ask students to write about the following questions:

- What is stress and what does it feel like?
- What causes you stress?
- Can stress be helpful?

After taking a few responses, emphasize the following points.

Stress can affect our brain and our body, our thoughts, and our emotions.

Stress rarely feels good, but it is natural, normal, and can help you in the following ways:

- It’s the brain’s alarm system, alerting you to threats and preparing you to meet them.
- It can give you an extra boost of energy – just like excitement – before you face a challenge.
- It can prompt you to fight, flee, or freeze in the face of real danger.
- It can motivate you to plan your time, to work hard, to seek help, to connect with others, to try new solutions.
- It can remind you of what you care about. For example, feeling stress about an audition can be a sign that drama or music matters to you; feeling upset over losing an object reminds us that it’s important to us.

Stress is normal and sometimes protective. But when too much of it floods our system, it’s like a storm, and it can affect our ability to reason, to keep things in perspective, to thoughtfully problem-solve.

Activity

Stop, Think, Write: Do you act your best when you are stressed? Have you ever made a choice you regretted, when you felt upset or anxious?

How we react under stress reveals a lot about our character. We may strive to be a kind and respectful person, but if we always lose our temper at others when something doesn’t go our way, we know we still have work to do in that area! We may strive to be a diligent student, but if we regularly neglect our studies when life gets busy or overwhelming, then we need to look for ways to strengthen our tenacity.

Have you ever seen a jar filled with glitter? That’s what your brain feels like during a stress response.

As a class, brainstorm strategies that help “settle the glitter” during stressful moments. These might include:



- Deep breathing
- Exercise
- Talking to someone you trust
- Meditation/prayer/stillness
- Art or music
- Time in nature (such as a walk outside)

Our aim is to consistently make choices that are in keeping with the type of person we want to become – even when we are under pressure. Try practicing these tools when you aren’t in a “stress storm,” so that you can draw on them more easily when you are.

Reflection: Write a Personal Resilience Story

Write a Personal Resilience Story. Think about a time when you were resilient in the face of stress — a time where you encountered something difficult and came out stronger.

- What was the challenge you faced?
- What strengths and strategies helped you handle the situation?
- How did you grow as a result of navigating this experience?



Lesson #4: The Courage of Ruby Bridges

Objective

To help students connect with the story of Ruby Bridges and explore how her motivation to attend school gave her the courage and tenacity to persevere despite extraordinary obstacles.

Opener

Imagine that you are walking toward the school. The streets are lined with protesters, and they are shouting at you, throwing things at you, and telling you to go home. A police officer shows up to help you walk safely into the building. What thoughts and feelings might enter your brain?

Show Normal Rockwell's famous painting ("The Problem We All Live With") of her walk to school and ask students what they notice:



Introduce the story of Ruby Bridges. The year Ruby Bridges was born, the Supreme Court issued a ruling on *Brown v. The Board of Education*, calling on schools to desegregate. However, integration did not happen right away. When Ruby Bridges was five years old, she attended a segregated Kindergarten in Louisiana with other African-American students. But the next year, she became the first black child to enroll in the all-white William Frantz Elementary School. When she arrived on the first day, there were crowds of people lining the streets to protest her enrollment in the school. They held up signs and yelled insults. But she did not turn around and head back

home. She kept returning to school day after day. Every teacher in the school refused to teach her except for one – so she was in a class by herself the first year with Ms. Barbara Henry who became a good friend. At first, all the parents of white children kept their kids home, but slowly they started to return to school. In the years that followed, the elementary school slowly became an integrated environment.

Activity

Ask students to respond first in writing and then aloud to the following questions: As a six-year-old, Ruby Bridges faced an incredibly stressful, challenging situation. Put yourself in her shoes for a moment. Why do you think she continued to go to school? What may have motivated her? What strengths did she show at this young age – what does this story reveal about her character?

Break the students into groups and give them each one of the following quotes. What else do you learn about this event and about Ruby Bridges' character from studying these quotes?

Quote #1: When Ruby made it through the crowds got her classroom, her teacher said to her, "I saw your lips moving, but I couldn't make out what you were saying to those people." "I wasn't talking to them," Ruby responded. "I was praying for them."

Quote #2: Years later, Ruby Bridges shared this advice: "Don't follow the path. Go where there is no path and begin the trail. When you start a new trail equipped with courage, strength and conviction, the only thing that can stop you is you!"

Quote #3: "I now know that experience comes to us for a purpose, and if we follow the guidance of the spirit within us, we will probably find that the purpose is a good one."

Quote #4: "Every day, I would show up, and there were no kids, just me and my teacher in my classroom. Every day, I would be escorted by marshals past a mob of people protesting and boycot-

ting the school. This went on for a whole year."

Quote #5: "If you really think about it, if we begin to teach history exactly the way that it happened – good, bad, ugly, no matter what – I believe that we're going to find that we are closer, more connected than we are apart."

Quote #6: "Now that I'm a parent, I know that my parents were incredibly brave."

Quote #7: "The greatest lesson I learned that year in Mrs. Henry's class was the lesson Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to teach us all: Never judge people by the color of their skin."

Quote #8: "The people I passed every morning as I walked up the school's steps were full of hate. They were white, but so was my teacher, who couldn't have been more different from them. She was one of the most loving people I had ever known."

Quote #9: "What I do remember about first grade and that year was that it was very lonely. I didn't have any friends, and I wasn't allowed to go to the cafeteria or play on the playground. What bothered me most was the loneliness in school every day."

Quote #10: "We'd get these boxes of clothing in the mail, and my mom would say, 'What makes you think all this is for you? You've got a sister right behind you.' So then I realized, we're all in this together. We have to help each other."

Reflection

Ask students to quietly write about the following questions:

1. You may not have to walk past angry crowds to get to school, but what is one way you have shown courage this year?
2. Who in your life would you describe as "brave"? Why?



Lesson #5: The Resilience of Eleanor Roosevelt

Objective

To help students explore how Eleanor Roosevelt, over time, channeled childhood fears into confident action.

Opener

Three years into the Great Depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president of the United States. His first [inaugural address](#) included this memorable line:

"Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself . . ."

Fear. What do we do with this emotion? Is fear it helpful? Harmful? When, why, and how?

Ask students to start by jotting down some thoughts about the following questions: *What is the role of fear? Can fear be a helpful emotion? When? Can it be harmful? How? Do you agree with FDR that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself"?*

After students share their ideas in small groups, open up the discussion, offering this insight:

Aristotle proposed that true courage is found between two extremes, both related to fear. Too much fear can lead to cowardice – or running away from making a good choice. Too little fear can lead a person to recklessness – or running headlong into a situation in a way that puts yourself or others at risk needlessly.

Courage is not denial of fear, which is probably there for a good reason, but rather choosing the right response anyway. When we are brave, we acknowledge our fear while also keeping in mind the bigger picture. It means you assess the situation and decide that there is something more vital than this emotion at stake. [As Harvard psychologist Dr. Susan David puts it](#), "Courage is not the absence of fear; courage is fear walking."

Discussion

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had a lot of experience with looking fear in the face – perhaps even more than her husband, FDR. Orphaned at an early age, Eleanor often talked about a childhood marked by trauma and anxiety.



Give students a hand-out with the following excerpt from her 1960 memoir, [You Learn by Living](#). In it she wrote:

Looking back it strikes me that my childhood and my early youth were one long battle against fear.

I was an exceptionally timid child, afraid of the dark, afraid of mice, afraid of practically everything. Painfully, step by step, I learned to stare down each of my fears, conquer it, attain the hard-earned courage to go on to the next. Only then was I really free. Of all the knowledge that we acquire in life this is the most difficult, but also the most rewarding. With each victory, no matter how great the cost or how agonizing at the time, there comes increased confidence and strength to help meet the next fear...

I can remember vividly an occasion when I was living in my grandmother's house on Thirty-seventh street in New York City. One of my aunts was ill and asked for some ice, which was kept in the icebox out of doors in the backyard. I was so frightened that I shook. But I could not refuse to go. If I did that, she would never again ask me to help her and I could not bear not to be asked. I had to go down alone from the third floor in the dark, creeping through the big house, which was so hostile and unfamiliar at night, in which unknown terrors seemed to lurk. Down to the basement, shutting a door behind me that cut me off from the house and safety. Out in the blackness of the backyard.

I suffered agonies of fear that night. But I learned that I could face the dark, and it never again held such horror for me...

You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, "I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along." The danger lies in refusing to face the fear, in not daring to come to grips with it... You must do the thing you think you cannot do.

Ask students to underline two sentences that strike them as important or insightful in this passage. Share and discuss, paragraph by paragraph. What does her story about a childhood fear teach us about courage and resilience?

Share with students: If you study Eleanor Roosevelt's biography, you begin to see a clear pattern: each time she began to feel consumed by fear or inadequacy, she reached out to others in need in extraordinary ways. She gained strength from personal struggles and actively looked for ways to ease the burdens of others. Her accomplishments include:

- Volunteering to care with wounded soldiers during WWI
- Serving in the leadership of the League of Women Voters
- Raising five children (a sixth child died in infancy) and serving as First Lady of the United States
- Touring the country during the Great Depression, meeting with struggling citizens, and serving as the "eyes and ears" of FDR (who used a wheelchair and for who travel was difficult)

- Writing a daily newspaper column, where she advocated for child welfare, housing reform, women's rights, and civil rights
- Resigning her Membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution when they refused to allow African-American singer Marian Anderson sing in their building – and arranging for her to instead sing at the Lincoln Memorial
- Serving as a delegate to the United Nations, where she chaired the Commission on Human Rights

Reflection

Ask students: Now that you know more about her accomplishments, look back at her story about being scared to get the ice for her aunt. What if she had let fear consistently hold her back? What might have been the ripple effect in her life?

In your notes, write about a time you “really stopped to look fear in the face.” Was Eleanor Roosevelt right? Did you “gain strength, courage, and/or confidence” when you did this?



Lesson #6: The Struggles of Mathematicians and Scientists

Objective

To help students make the connection between perseverance and success in STEM.

Opener

Ask students to jot down reflections about the following questions:

What does the word “struggle” mean? When you hear the word “struggle,” does it have positive or negative connotations? Do strong math and science students “struggle” with the subject?

After five minutes of writing, ask students to share their ideas with a partner or small group.

Then pose this question: How can struggles be valuable to the learning process?

After taking some comments, share aloud this passage from [“Struggle Means Learning: Difference in Eastern and Western Cultures”](#):

In 1979, when Jim Stigler was still a graduate student at the University of Michigan, he went to Japan to research teaching methods and found himself sitting in the back row of a crowded fourth-grade math class.



“The teacher was trying to teach the class how to draw three-dimensional cubes on paper,” Stigler explains, “and one kid was just totally having trouble with it. His cube looked all cockeyed, so the teacher said to him, ‘Why don’t you go put yours on the board?’ So right there I thought, ‘That’s interesting! He took the one who can’t do it and told him to go and put it on the board.’”

Stigler knew that in American classrooms, it was usually the best kid in the class who was invited to the board. And so he watched with interest as the Japanese student dutifully came to the board and started drawing, but still couldn’t complete the cube. Every few minutes, the teacher would ask the rest of the class whether the kid had gotten it right, and the class would look up from their work, and shake their heads no. And as the period progressed, Stigler noticed that he – Stigler – was getting more and more anxious.

In Japanese classrooms, teachers consciously design tasks that are slightly beyond the capabilities of the students they teach, so the students can actually experience struggling with something just outside their reach.

“I realized that I was sitting there starting to perspire,” he says, “because I was really empathizing with this kid. I thought, ‘This kid is going to break into tears!’”

But the kid didn’t break into tears. Stigler says the child continued to draw his cube with equanimity. “And at the end of the class, he did make his cube look right! And the teacher said to the class, ‘How does that look, class?’ And they all looked up and said, ‘He did it!’ And they broke into applause.” The kid smiled a huge smile and sat down, clearly proud of himself.

Stigler is now a professor of psychology at UCLA who studies teaching and learning around the world, and he says it was this small experience that first got him thinking about how differently East and West approach the experience of intellectual struggle.

“I think that from very early ages we [in America] see struggle as an indicator that you’re just not very smart,” Stigler says. “It’s a sign of low ability – people who are smart don’t struggle, they just naturally get it, that’s our folk theory. Whereas in Asian cultures they tend to see struggle more as an opportunity.”

In Eastern cultures, Stigler says, it’s just assumed that struggle is a predictable part of the learning process. Everyone is expected to struggle in the process of learning, and so struggling becomes a chance to show that you, the student, have what it takes emotionally to resolve the problem by persisting through that struggle.



Discussion

Ask students: Speaking of struggle, do you know of any mathematicians and scientists that struggled with learning? When we learn about famous people, we often only hear about their successes, not the personal and intellectual challenges they faced along the way. But great math and science breakthroughs always come with struggle – the people we read about are those

who didn't give up when things got tough. They had the tenacity to stick with a problem.

- Rachel Carson
- Stephen Hawking

Share with students that a [study](#) out of Columbia University found that when students learned about the struggles of scientists, they were more motivated to persevere in their science class. The researchers wrote: "When students struggle in science classes, they may misperceive their struggle as an indication that they are not good at science and will never succeed." But when students learn about how even famous scientists struggled, they began to see that encountering challenges – and learning from them – was simply part of the professional journey.

Ask students to share and discuss their reactions to this study ([you can read more about it here](#)).

Then, write down some or all of the following names on the board:

- Katherine Johnson
- Marie Curie
- Albert Einstein
- Niccolò Fontana Tartaglia
- Mary Anning
- Alfred Nobel
- Mary Jackson
- George Washington Carver
- Michael Faraday
- Tu Youyou
- E.O. Wilson

Assign these mathematicians and scientists to individuals or groups. In class or for homework, ask students to research both what the individual was famous for and ways in which they struggled personally, academically, or professionally. Share these findings with the class.

Reflection

Offer the following prompt for reflective writing:

Stanford researcher Carol Dweck [wrote](#): "Effort is one of the things that gives meaning to life. Effort means you care about something, that something is important to you and you are willing to work for it. It would be an impoverished existence if you were not willing to value things and commit yourself to working toward them."

Think back to the opening discussion about "struggle." What is one moment in your life when you struggled and persevered? What gave you the motivation to keep going? What did that experience teach you?



How Stories Support Academic Tenacity

Reading stories about scientists' struggles – of stress tests character – can help high school students strengthen their motivation. In an article for NPR's MindShift, LCI Associate Director Deborah Farmer Kris summarized the research this way:

What kind of people can become scientists? When a group of researchers posed that question to ninth- and 10th-graders, almost every student gave empowering responses, such as "People who work hard" or "Anyone who seems interested in the field of science."

But despite these generalized beliefs, many of these same students struggled to imagine themselves as scientists, citing concerns such as "I'm not good at science" and "Even if I work hard, I will not do well."

It's understandable that students might find imagining themselves as scientists a stretch – great achievements in science get far more attention than the failed experiments, so it's easy to see a scientist's work as stemming from an innate talent. Additionally, several science fields have a long way to go to be more inclusive of women and underrepresented minorities.

But for high school students, learning more about some of the personal and intellectual struggles of scientists can help students feel more motivated to learn science. Researchers at Teachers College, Columbia University and the University of Washington designed an intervention to "confront students' beliefs that scientific achievement reflects ability rather than effort by exposing students to stories of how accomplished scientists struggled and overcame challenges in their scientific endeavors."

During the study, the students read one of three types of stories about Albert Einstein, Marie Curie and Michael Faraday:

Intellectual struggle stories: stories about how scientists "struggled intellectually," such as making mistakes while tackling a scientific problem and learning from these setbacks.

Life struggle stories: stories about how scientists struggled in their personal lives, such as persevering in the face of poverty or lack of family support.

Achievement stories: stories about how scientists made great discoveries, without any discussion of concurrent challenges.

Researchers found that students who heard either type of "struggle story" improved their science performance post-intervention, relative to students in the control group. The effect was especially pronounced for lower-performing students, for whom "exposure to struggling stories led to significantly better science-class performance than low-performing students who read achievement stories." In addition, students who read struggle stories reported feeling more personally connected

to the scientists.

Many high school students view scientific ability as a fixed trait that is not responsive to effort. As the researchers wrote: "When students struggle in science classes, they may misperceive their struggle as an indication that they are not good at science and will never succeed." By identifying a scientist's struggles and introducing the growth mindset he or she applied to accomplish great works, the students were able to empathize with the scientists during their own struggles. The researchers identified stories as a learning tool because of stories' ability to influence readers' beliefs.



Storytelling in Science: Books That Connect Students with Scientists' Struggles

Stress tests of character are real in every field, and they can yield both inspiration and valuable lessons in character. According to a recent study, teens who read about the personal and intellectual struggles of scientists feel more motivated to learn science. In her article "[How Teens Benefit From Reading About the Struggles of Scientists](#)," LCI Associate Director Deborah Farmer Kris wrote:

It's understandable that students might find imagining themselves as scientists a stretch -- great achievements in science get far more attention than the failed experiments, so it's easy to see a scientist's work as stemming from an innate talent. Additionally, several science fields have a long way to go to be more inclusive of women and underrepresented minorities.

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Here are 15 science resources that can help connect students with the stress tests of character faced by successful scientists

1. [Ada Byron Lovelace and The Thinking Machine, by Laurie Wallmark and April Chu](#)

Ada Byron Lovelace was the world's first computer programmer, creating a coding algorithm years before the modern computer was invented. This picture book biography describes how measles left her temporarily blind and paralyzed and how she overcame society's negative attitudes towards women in the sciences.

2. [Rachel Carson and Her Book That Changed the World, by Laurie Lawler and Laura Beingessner](#)

Rachel Carson's writing and research helped launch the modern environmental movement. This picture book shares her struggles growing up in poverty during the Great Depression, the sacrifices her family made to send her to college, and the challenges she faced entering a male-dominated field.

3. [On a Beam of Light, by Jennifer Berne and Vladimir Radunsky](#)

Through simple text and stunning illustrations, this book explores Albert Einstein's early struggles with learning and school – and how they propelled his later accomplishments. The New York Times described this book as "something of an It Gets Better Project for mathematically precocious children."

4. [Snowflake Bentley by Jacqueline Briggs Martin and Mary Azarian](#)

Wilson Bentley was a nature photographer who showed the world that "no two snowflakes are alike." This picture book describes his unstoppable grit in pursuit of his dream and includes sidebars with more information about the methods and science behind his work.

5. [The Tree Lady: The True Story of How One Tree-Loving Woman Changed a City Forever by H. Joseph Hopkins and Jill McElmurry](#)

Botanist Kate Sessions, the first woman to graduate from the University of California with a science degree, is best known for transforming San Diego from a desert town to a green paradise. The picture book describes obstacles and social taboos that she faced and overcame, utilizing the refrain: "but she did."

6. [Summer Birds: The Butterflies of Maria Merian by Margarita Engle and Julie Paschkis](#)

In seventeenth-century Europe – when many thought butterflies were evil creatures that generated spontaneously from mud – entomologist Maria Merian made her mission to study them. After years of study, she wrote and illustrated a groundbreaking book about the life cycle of a butterfly. This picture book describes how she conducted much of her work in secret because of the negative perceptions around this insect.

7. [Life in the Ocean: The Story of Oceanographer Sylvia Earle by Claire A. Nivola](#)

As her biography at National Geographic notes, "called 'Her Deepness' by the New Yorker and the New York Times, 'Living Legend' by the Library of Congress, and first 'Hero for the Planet' by Time magazine, [Sylvia Earle] is an oceanographer, explorer, author, and lecturer." This beautifully illustrated picture book describes how a difficult move to a new state during her childhood awakened a life-long passion. The author's note would also make a good read-aloud for teens, describing her scientific work in more depth and how she "defied conventional expectations at every stage of her life."

8. [My Brief History, by Stephen Hawking](#)

At 144 pages, this brief memoir is broken into several small chapters in which theoretical physicist and cosmologist Stephen Hawking writes about his childhood, his research and – of course – his life with ALS, which gradually paralyzed him over the course of decades and required him to develop compensatory methods for engaging in his research. Teachers could use or read aloud excerpts of this compelling autobiography.

9. [Feynman, by Jim Ottaviani and Leland Myrick](#)

Written for teens, this graphic novel vividly portrays the life of the vivacious physicist Richard Feynman. It captures his tenacity in the face of trying circumstances – from working on the Manhattan project to uncovering the cause of the Challenger explosion to caring for his ailing wife.

10. [Primates: The Fearless Science of Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, and Biruté Galdikas, by Jim Ottaviani and Maris Wicks](#)

This is another graphic novel for teens, tracing the lives of three primatologists who were students of Richard Leakey and who lived among the primates. As the Booklist review notes, "For all the playful mugging and gratifying discoveries, though, Ottaviani doesn't shy away from the struggles of living and working in the bush."

11. [Breakthrough! How Three People Saved "Blue Babies" and Changed Medicine Forever, by Jim Murphy](#)

Knapp describes this short nonfiction narrative as a "wonderfully written story of a black man, a white man and a woman, who all struggled in different ways (personally and professionally) to pioneer a surgery that saved the lives of 'blue babies.'"

12. [What Color is My World? The Lost History of African-American Inventors, by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Raymond Obstfeld](#)

This collection features several short life-sketches of African-American inventors – from Henry Sampson (who created the gamma-electric cell) to Percy Julian (who synthesized cortisone from soy). The stories emphasize the perseverance of these inventors in the face of racism and other life challenges.

13. [Headstrong: 52 Women Who Changed Science – and the World, by Rachel Swaby](#)

These short biographical sketches average four pages in

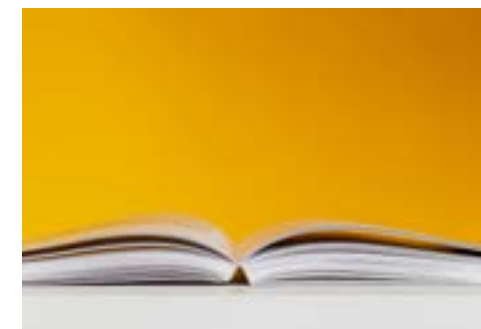
length – an easy read aloud – and highlight female scientists in the following fields: medicine, biology and the environment, genetics and development, physics, earth and stars, math and technology, and invention. Several stories note obstacles they faced, including gender bias, illness, and family disapproval.

14. [Brilliant Blunders: From Darwin to Einstein – Colossal Mistakes by Great Scientists That Changed Our Understanding of Life and the Universe, by Mario Livio](#)

In this 300+ page book, astrophysicist Mario Livio draws on the lives of five scientists (Charles Darwin, Lord Kelvin, Linus Pauling, Fred Hoyle, and Albert Einstein) to show how great progress often comes in the wake of "colossal mistakes." This is a great resource book for high school science teachers who want to infuse their classes with stories about how setbacks can set the stage for progress – if we let them.

15. [The PBS/NOVA web-series, The Secret Life of Scientists and Engineers](#)

"provides" a humanizing snapshot of scientists who are shaping our world." Each episode profiles a contemporary scientist in three or four discrete, one-to-three minute video clips. The site is searchable by topic and includes blog posts and a teacher's guide.



8 Ways to Use Story in the Classroom to Foster Character Strengths

1. Hidden Figures: Tell stories about key people in your field who have struggled and overcome adversity.

Every math equation, science discovery, artistic composition, written document or seminal event has human beings behind it – a person or persons who studied, invented, struggled, explored, and stuck with the task at hand. Share their stories as a read aloud, as a five-minute “hook” to start a new unit, or as a motivational moment to inspire students and to help them see the tenacity and resilience behind the scenes.

2. Picture This: Post pictures in your classroom of individuals who embody tenacity and resilience.

In a speech advocating women in sports, tennis legend Billie Jean King said, “You have to see it to be it.” Post pictures of strong exemplars in your field and refer to them throughout the year. Having inclusive visual role models helps students imagine themselves in different professions.

3. Imagine That: Pose a typical “stress test” that a professional in your field might face and ask students to imagine their response.

After sharing a challenge a professional in your field might face, ask students to consider what their first reaction might be in such a situation: Fear? Embarrassment? Stress? Anger? Then ask them to reflect on what they would want the outcome to be. If they were in this situation, what steps could they take to navigate this challenge? What internal strengths would help them handle it successfully? (tenacity, patience, courage, compassion, creativity, empathy, hope, gratitude, resilience, etc).

4. Mine Your Experience: What stories do you have from your own life or from your teaching career that might help motivate students when they are faced with a challenge?

Students love stories. Using an occasional, appropriate personal anecdote – of a time you or one of your former students struggled with a concept, a task, or an interpersonal situation – can help students connect with you and see you as someone who has the empathy and capacity to coach them through their own academic difficulties.

5. Be Our Guest: Bring in guest speakers who can inspire your students with their life journey.

Classroom visitors are memorable because they provide a new voice and a break from routine. You don't need to bring in a famous guest. Look for a parent, community member, or alumnae who work in your field and who has a story they can share with students about the challenges they have faced and overcome on their career or personal journey. Ask them to share what habits or strengths have helped them in their life.

6. Step Into Their Shoes: Ask students to write creative fiction from the perspective of a key figure in your field.

After students hear the story of a scientist, mathematician, writer, artist, or historical figure who has faced and overcome challenges, invite them to write a journal entry or letter from the perspective of that person. What emotions did they experience? Did they consider giving up? What motivated them to keep going? What steps did they take? What internal strengths, or virtues, helped them handle this challenge?

7. Resilience Stories: Ask students to write about a time when they faced a challenge and worked their way through it.

The stories we tell about our own lives can bolster our confidence and strengthen resilience to face future challenges. Ask students to recall and write about one of their own “resilience stories.” What made the situation difficult? What inspired them to keep going? What help did they receive? What internal strengths helped them handle this challenge? (tenacity, patience, courage, compassion, creativity, empathy, hope, gratitude, resilience, etc).

8. Fast Forward: Ask students to imagine and write about their future selves.

Stories help students remember the “why” in the work. At the beginning of the year, you could ask them to write their own final report card comment – noting the personal strengths and academic skills they developed this year. Or you could ask them to write a letter to themselves on graduation day, expressing what they hoped they have learned and the type of person they hope they have become. Encourage them to include at least one stress test in their comment or letter.



Using Stress Test Stories: Guiding Questions for Teachers

We learn more about character from a life than a lesson. You can use stories in your classroom to help your students explore how other people navigate stress tests of character.

Start by reflecting on these questions:

- Who are the women and men in my field who have inspired me? What stories have I encountered that have influenced my understanding of this field?
- What other stories can I seek out? Teens crave role models and exemplars – and when we offer them rich, diverse stories, they can start to see themselves in the narrative.

After you identify a “stress test story,” engage students in critical thinking with guiding questions such as these:

Context: What is the context of this story? What internal and external factors contributed to this moment/situation?

First Reactions: Imagine you were in this situation. What first reactions would be understandable under the circumstances? What emotions might a person experience?

Possible Responses: What are the array of possible choices this person had in front of them – and what would be the potential consequences of each?

Motivation: What might be guiding this individual's decision making and why?

Character Strengths: In this situation, what virtues/strengths are being tested? What virtues/strengths would they need to make the best possible decision?

Actual Responses: What did the person in the story ultimately choose to do? What does this suggest about his/her character? Who was affected? In hindsight, what do we know now that might have been valuable insight to this person?

As you explore stress test stories, the people your students meet will become points of reference for future discussions in the classroom – and will inspire students when they face their own stress tests of character.



“There is a Reason You Are Here”: How Katherine Johnson and Other Exemplary Women Help Teens Aim for Greatness



Ms. Johnson passed away on February 25 at age 101, and her extraordinary legacy as a female, African-American scientist will long outlive her.

Recently high school junior Neha Sunkara '21 spent weeks studying Katherine Johnson for a research paper. Neha is a student in Montrose School in Medfield, MA.

“She transformed the space race for America, but she wasn’t as well known until the movie *Hidden Figures* came out,” said Neha. “I want to be an astrophysicist, and sometimes I feel alone in my passion. Knowing someone else like Katherine Johnson is in the math world made such a big impact on me.”

Neha shared that Johnson’s father “only had a sixth-grade education and was determined that his children would have the most education possible.” Johnson started high school at 10, began college at 14 and graduated from West Virginia State by 18 in 1937 – *summa cum laude* with a double major in French and mathematics. The job market was slim for a black female teenage mathematician. So she became a teacher at a black high school before being hand-picked as one of three African-Americans to integrate the all-white West Virginia University as a graduate student.

Neha was inspired by Johnson’s storied 33-year-career at NASA, her commitment to her three daughters and their education, and her unabashed passion for numbers. “She loved math because there was a visible objective at the end. I could connect to that – in math and life. There is an objective to life: there is a reason you are here, and you have to find it.”

Several of Neha’s classmates also found inspiration while studying the lives of exemplary African-American women for their research projects.

This week, the world lost a mathematical pathbreaker. Katherine Johnson was one of NASA’s “*Hidden Figures*” – a brilliant mathematician who calculated the trajectory for the Apollo 11 flight. It was her precise calculations that got Neil Armstrong to the moon and back.

Ms. Johnson passed away on February 25 at age 101, and her extraordinary legacy as a female, African-American

“What you focus on expands”

Lucy Stefani '21 chose to study Oprah Winfrey. Oprah’s current eponymous fame belies how culturally transformative her show was. “This was not your typical daytime talk show,” said Lucy. “She brought in regular people. She talked about difficult issues – including episodes devoted to sexual abuse – and gave people a way to talk about them on the show and in real life. She helped open up great dialogue.”

Oprah’s life story – including the poverty, abuse, and the instability she endured in her early years – became a motivating factor in her career. Over time, said Lucy, she worked to become “the best version of herself instead of giving in to her circumstances.”

At one point as a young adult, Oprah was in an unhealthy relationship and “had a moment of clarity while looking in a mirror. She said to herself ‘I need to find the strength within me to make this end.’” Lucy added that Oprah’s fierce commitment to gratitude inspires her. “As Oprah says, ‘What you focus on expands.’ She even keeps a gratitude journal. It makes me think, ‘If Oprah can do it, I can put aside my feelings about homework – or whatever is getting me down – and focus on one good aspect of the day.’”

“You are going to change the world”

Before Maevis Fahey '21 started her research project, she knew very little about Condoleezza Rice – just that she was the second female and first African-American to serve as the US Secretary of State.

“Now I feel like I have shaken her hand,” said Maevis. “After reading her memoirs and her writings, I feel like I know her and her character.”

Rice grew up in Birmingham in the 1950s. “Her parents were both teachers, and her dad was a local pastor. They were constantly reminding her, ‘You are a child of God. You are going to change the world.’ And they gave up so much for her.” Despite their modest circumstances, they found a way to pay for figure skating and piano lessons – and she became professionally accomplished at each.

“The two words that I used in my paper to describe her,” Maevis said, “are grit and elegance. Her father wanted her to love football, and her mom wanted her to play piano.” Though her mom didn’t live to see her most famous accomplishments, Maevis explains that “everything they had taught their daughter came to fruition.”

Maevis found one story emblematic: “[Rice] learned music before she learned to read. She wanted to be a concert pianist. On the night of 9/11, she was at Camp David with the president. Nobody knew what was going to happen. After hours, she sat down with another member of the White House staff, and they started to play piano and sing.” Under this incredible pressure and uncertainty, “she brought beauty,” Maevis observed.

During their research, these three young women found inspiration not just in their subjects’ accomplishments but in their persistence and resilience in the face of challenges, including systemic racial injustice. Katherine Johnson, Oprah Winfrey, and Condoleezza Rice had mentors and family who supported them, and in turn, they have become exemplars for millions of others. They inspire these Montrose juniors – and the rest of us – to aim for greatness.

This article by Deborah Farmer Kris is reprinted from the *LifeCompass Blog* Feb. 25, 2020.



The Power of a Family Story

My siblings have been telling Grandma Bohlin stories since I was a child. "Did you know she drove from New Jersey to Boston to see Grandpa in his Drum Corps Performance?" one story began. "When she hit Commonwealth Avenue, she followed the trolley tracks underground right into the station!"

Grandma Bohlin was a youthful 62 when she died of a heart attack. I never had a chance to meet her, yet I have heard so much about the days surrounding her passing that I feel like I was there.

My brother Dennis was eight years old when he stumbled upon my mother dissolved in tears at the kitchen table. He stood awkwardly in the doorway as she sobbed. "Your grandmother just passed away." Dennis steeled his gut and made a desperate plea, "Please, God, no."

Steve, who was seven at the time, was likewise distraught by my grandmother's death. When he finally returned to school after the wake and the funeral, he chose not to take the bus home at the end of the day. Escaping the bus monitor's notice, Steve made his way along back roads to my grandmother's modest home and familiar front porch. And he spent the afternoon sitting on the stoop, hoping that she might show up.

In the meantime, my mother launched a search party of neighbors and friends to look for her first-grade son who had not returned from school. After a call to the police and my father's early return from work, it dawned on them where he might be.

As they pulled up to my grandmother's house they spotted Steven, forlorn, sitting atop the front steps as if keeping vigil.

I have always wondered what it was about Grandma Bohlin that gives her such a sacred place in the hearts and collective memory of my family. She struggled to make ends meet and held down a part-time job until the day she died. She never bought the boys expensive gifts or took them on vacations. She did faithfully bestow her characteristic warmth and attention. She listened. She got down on her hands and knees to play games with them. And she orchestrated a favorite annual tradition: the Easter egg hunt on her front lawn. My brothers remember fondly her weekly surprise visits. She would sweep them up from under my mother's tired feet and take them for an afternoon of adventure.

Grandma Bohlin's affection and self-giving left an indelible impression on my family. Inevitably, at every family party, stories of Grandma Bohlin surface. Her life is honored in story, and she continues to influence and shape our family.

In his delightful New York Times piece "[The Stories that Bind Us](#)," Bruce Feiler cites research on the power of family stories in helping children develop a sense of belonging and a vision of who they can become. Moreover, children "who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challeng-

es." Feiler explains:

[Researchers] developed a measure called the "Do You Know?" scale that asked children to answer 20 questions. Examples included: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?

Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush asked those questions of four dozen families in the summer of 2001, and taped several of their dinner table conversations. They then compared the children's results to a battery of psychological tests the children had taken, and reached an overwhelming conclusion. The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The "Do You Know?" scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness.

"We were blown away," Dr. Duke said.

Two months later, after the devastating events of September 11, they reassessed the children. Once again, the children who knew more about their family were proving more resilient. Why? "The answers have to do with a child's sense of being part of a larger family," Dr. Duke said.

As I think back on some of the more difficult moments in my family, I remember my brothers saying, what would Grandma Bohlin do? How would she respond? Her story is a critical part of who we are individually and as a family. Dostoevsky captures this power beautifully at the close of his *Brothers Karamazov*: "You must know that there is nothing higher, or stronger, or sounder, or more useful afterwards in life, than some good memory, especially a memory from childhood, from home... even if only one good memory remains with us in our hearts, that alone may serve us one day for our salvation."

As you share family stories, know that amidst the laughter and the tears, you are strengthening hearts and minds for a lifetime.

This article by Karen E. Bohlin is reprinted from the *LifeCompass Blog* Nov. 5, 2018.



100-Year Ripples: What My Grandmothers' Stories Can Teach Me About Pandemic Parenting



On February 1, 1919, my grandmother Eliza Ellen turned four years old. Twenty days later, influenza stole away her mother.

The third wave of the global pandemic had found its way to the woods of Monroe County, Arkansas that winter. Her mother, Marie, was 34 when she died.

Eliza Ellen and her five siblings still had a father, technically. But he was ill-equipped financially and emotionally to care for six children. He began to leave them alone for days and then weeks at a stretch. At times, grandma subsisted on soda crackers and jelly. Eventually, the state stepped in, and grandma was sent to live in St. Joseph's Orphanage in Little Rock.

I have only one tangible record of Great-Grandma Marie's short life: a small, grainy portrait of a young woman in a starched dress, resting her hand on a kitchen chair. A pair of trousers hang at a slant on a clothesline behind her. When I found the photo as a teenager, her face startled me; we look like sisters. At some point, I snuck this photo out of the family album and put it in a frame by my bed.

These days, Marie and Eliza Ellen often slip into my mind. A century separates the end of that pandemic to the start of this one, but history doesn't have discrete start and end dates. Events ripple forward. What was set in motion in February 1919 laps at my ankles as I think about how to parent in 2020.

The four-year-old girl left behind survived. And then survived again and again and again, enduring traumas I hope my children never face – and yet possessing a resilience and fierce optimism I hope I can pass on to her great-grandchildren.

Storytelling is a powerful vehicle for shaping children's understanding of the world. According to [one study](#), children who hear stories about how family members and ancestors overcame obstacles are more resilient in the face of challenges. The most helpful narratives reflect life's ups and downs, and ultimately remind children that "they belong to something bigger than themselves."

Stories give us an opportunity to see how other people [navigate life's challenges](#), for better or worse. In our classrooms, [stories](#) can help students see the [scientists](#), mathematicians, and the people who occupy their history books as real people who struggled with internal and external challenges, just like we all do.

Family stories are part of our core curriculum right now. Here's a story I have told my kids recently

When Eliza Ellen was a teenager, she left her life in Arkansas and made her way to California, where she found a job as a waitress. One day my grandpa walked into her diner, and three weeks later they got married. She wanted a little girl of her own to dote on – to dress up in lace and shiny shoes and all pretty things she never had. After my dad was born, she was unable to have any more children, but she eventually adopted two girls from Korea who had lost their parents to the war.

I remember how she cared for stray and lost things. Her two-bedroom home sheltered a dozen cats, a few birds, and a lumbering basset hound. Every morning, she made her way around the block, feeding unwanted animals and checking in on neighbors. She liked to buy me the puffiest dresses she could find at the local department store. She couldn't read well, but she sent her son to college and then graduate school. She didn't drive, but she once took a dozen busses around Los Angeles hunting for the Cabbage Patch Doll I wanted for my eighth birthday.

My daughter is eight. Her middle name is Eliza, and a picture of her great-grandma hangs above her desk, looking down on her as she works on homeschool projects. My daughter has lots of questions.

"Has this ever happened before?" she asked me last week. "Have there been sicknesses that traveled around the world like this?"

"What are families doing who can't go to work from home like you and daddy? How are they getting money?"

"Who is taking care of animals in the shelters?"

"Besides staying at home, what can we do to help?"

"What do you think I'll tell my kids about what life was like during the coronavirus?"

In her questions, I hear echoes of my grandmothers' stories. I also hear in her my grandmother's empathy – an empathy that was born in the sorrow of 1919.

My social media feed is filled with wonderful ideas for parenting during a pandemic – schedules and websites and virtual

field trips. But if I turn inward for advice, I can hear my grandmothers whispering in my ear: "Slow down. It's okay to drop your plan for the morning and just snuggle. It's okay that they are extra moody and needy. It's okay that you are uncertain about the future. You are strong. They are resilient. Read silly stories. Bake cookies as often as you'd like. Tell them lots and lots of family stories. If they feel loved and connected at the end of this, you've done enough. You are enough."

This article by Deborah Farmer Kris is reprinted from the *LifeCompass Blog* May 13, 2020.



Turning Down the Hose: 4 Questions That Help Children Navigate Stress

A few weeks ago, I found myself locked in a power struggle with a five-year-old. I think it involved a Lego explosion in his room. I know it involved angry voices.

After a few minutes of rising drama, the older sister came over and whispered in my ear, "Mom, I think he's just tired and hangry – try giving him a snack." She could have added, "You probably need one, too."

She was right. After a snack break, somehow the clean-up job wasn't quite so onerous.

Stress is a normal part of life, but we don't always react well when our brain is on high alert. In the moment, stress can feel like taking a firehose to the face: it's hard to think clearly and act reasonably.

I recently built an acronym both for my kids and for the teenagers I teach – four questions they can ask themselves when they feel their mood dip or their anxiety rise.

These four questions can help all of us turn down the HOSE and respond to stress with a little more wisdom.

H: Am I hungry?

O: Am I overstimulated?

S: Do I need to sleep?

E: Do I need to exercise?

H: Am I hungry?

Hunger affects mood. When we haven't eaten for a while, our blood sugar dips, and this triggers the release of hormones to "[raise and rebalance](#)" blood sugar levels. These hormones include cortisol and adrenaline – the same ones that are released during a stress response.

According to Dr. Christine Lee of the Cleveland Clinic, "The release of cortisol can cause aggression in some people. Also, low blood sugar may interfere with higher brain functions, such as those that help us control impulses and regulate our primitive drives and behavior."

[Researchers](#) have even found that judges are less likely to grant parole when they are hungry.

So if you find that your emotional regulation wanes at predictable times of day – like the mid-afternoon – experiment with eating a healthy snack and making time for a mindful check-in with your body.



O: Am I overstimulated?

It turns out that our brains can't be on focus mode all of the time, and there is only so much stimulus we can take in at once. While we all can benefit from quiet time to recharge, [introverts](#) can be particularly [sensitive](#) to external stimuli. Mental down-time – or "diffuse mode" – helps the brain process the events of the day and boosts creativity. [Daydreaming is good for you.](#)

A word of caution: often we turn to electronics for down-time, but usually this is just another form of stimulation. Instead of focusing on bills and homework, we are focusing on a game or video. While pleasurable, these activities don't make space for quiet reflecting and recharging.

So if you feel yourself on "overload," ask yourself if you can take ten minutes to step away . . . and to jog around the block, take a warm shower, meditate or pray, engage in focused breathing, drink a cup of tea, snuggle with a pet, or [sit in nature.](#)

S: Do I need to sleep?

"Sleep is the glue that holds human beings together," [says Dr. Lisa Damour](#), an adolescent psychologist. When we are sleep-deprived, we are less emotionally resilient. Sleep keeps the amygdala working properly – that's the part of the brain that helps control our emotional responses, including fear, anger and anxiety.

When [I asked middle school students](#) how they finished the sentence "When I don't get enough sleep..." here were some of their responses:

It's hard to focus in class; I can't concentrate; I can't think clear-

Coaching Teens Through Life's Challenges

ly. My body starts to feel heavy; I get headaches; I feel clumsy. I get so grumpy; my head spins with negative thoughts; I yell or cry for no reason; I am more sensitive; I'm impatient; my emotions are just out of whack. Or, as one girl, summarized, "When I don't get enough sleep, everything is harder."

So when you feel anger or frustration rising, one question worth asking yourself is, "Did I get enough sleep last night? If not, could that be affecting how I see this situation?"

Even if you can't take a nap on the spot, this awareness might be enough to prompt you take a few deep breaths and find other ways to settle the stress response. ([Click here](#) to read more about teens and sleep.)

E: Do I need to exercise?

We often talk about exercise as something that is good for the heart or the waistline. But that's a limited perspective. Neuropsychologist Wendy Suzuki argues that exercise is the most transformational thing you can do for your brain because exercise boosts mood and improves focus, memory, and cognition.

[As she shared with me in this interview:](#)

When [kids] run around, their brains are getting a bubble bath of good neurochemicals, neurotransmitters and endorphins . . . Adults need

this, too. Even though it takes time from your workday, it will give you back time. You will be more productive if you take that time off. Even if it's just a walk up and down the stairs or a walk around the block. That is a surefire way to make your work more productive. It's how humans were built. We were not built to sit in front of a screen all day long. Our bodies and brains work better with regular movement. It's better than coffee.

These four quick "check-in" questions can help us mindfully manage our emotional reactions (instead of letting them manage us). These questions do not minimize the very real responsibilities, worries, and stresses that we face in our lives. Rather they help us notice our reactions – without getting stuck in them – and then make choices that are consistent with our better selves.

From LEGO explosions to school pressures to family tension, sometimes we all need a nap and a snack to think more clearly.

This article by Deborah Farmer Kris is reprinted from the *LifeCompass Blog* Jan. 9, 2020.



"Let me do it. I can do it! Let me try.... I want to try!" is both a familiar and endearing toddler refrain. Young children are wired to ask questions and explore their world. As kids grow older and social expectations set in, the stakes become higher. And often we, as adults, are not as comfortable "letting" children do, try and get curious about solving problems on their own. Once they seem hesitant, we are all too ready to leap in, fix and give advice. But should we?

Parents play a vital role in coaching their children through life's ups and downs. A recent [Yale University study](#) found that *how* parents react to their children's stress can have a huge impact on creating or diminishing anxiety. By adopting a coaching mentality and asking guiding questions, parents can help their teens develop the life compass they need to confidently navigate the challenges that lie ahead.

Of course, when it is YOUR child who comes home upset, it can be hard to think clearly and respond calmly in the moment. I've spent the last thirty years working with middle, high school and college students. When a young person comes to me upset, I still have to remind myself to pause, take a deep breathe, and let their "glitter settle" before engaging in any coaching. Here are two pieces of practical wisdom that help me as I work with teens and young adults – and that might help you as you parent them.

Be Mindful of Your First Reactions

"I have no friends." Your daughter was happy when you dropped her off in the morning, but at pick up she slumps into the front seat. You ask how her day was, and she mumbles "fine." As you round the corner, out of sight from school, her true feelings tumble out. She missed an end of summer party while you were on family vacation, and now she feels out of the loop. Her best friend isn't in any of her classes. To top it off, a teacher put her in a group with all new students and asked her to show them the ropes – but it's not fair that she is expected to help other people when she feels so out of touch herself. Doesn't anyone care about *her* feelings?

Her complaints are crushing, especially since you know how much she was looking forward to returning to school. You can't help but feel a little upset too; after all, you know from experience how important friendships are in middle school and high school. Or, maybe you feel a little impatient that she has been let down so easily. It's only the first month of school. And why *wouldn't* she want to help the new students? You have all kinds of ideas and advice bubbling up inside of you, but when you offer your wisdom, she yells, "You just don't understand!"

It's only human for parents to have strong emotional reactions when their child is in distress. We may be tempted to commiserate, but getting too emotionally involved can make an issue feel bigger than it actually is. Likewise, offering what we see as

a quick solution can inadvertently disempower your children, depriving them of the practice they need to resolve issues independently and grow in confidence.

Experts remind us – and my own experience confirms this-- that the most effective response is one that validates your children's feelings and experiences while coaching them from the sidelines. Many times, parents need not say much. A simple, sympathetic "I hear you. That must be tough" is often all the help they need to begin to resolve a problem on their own. Psychologist Lisa Damour [offers](#) this wonderful phrase to use when you don't know what else to say: "That stinks. How do you want to handle it?" Then give them the space to respond – even if it takes a few days.

Keep Your Eye on the Why

"The class is just too hard. There is a lot of reading, three papers, a project with classmates I don't know. And my teacher doesn't like me."

History was your daughter's favorite subject. For years, she has talked about becoming an anthropologist. But this year the assignments overwhelm her, and she has been assigned a major group project with students she doesn't know well. To make matters worse, she seems to have started off on the wrong foot with her teacher. Not only is your daughter's enthusiasm for history taking a turn, her attitude toward school in general seems to be waning. And she takes out all of her frustrations on the family.

Parents can't help but feel discouraged when their daughter appears stuck in a losing game. While it may be tempting to jump in and intervene – calling the teacher to complain or becoming overly involved in her homework – keep your coach's hat on.

Instead of proposing solutions, ask questions:

- What bothers you most about this situation?
- What are you aiming at?
- What would you like to see happen?
- This is a big/exciting/difficult challenge. How do you break this down?
- What's one step you can take right away?
- What support do you need from me (or someone else)?

When teens feel heard and are encouraged to tackle problems independently, they grow in confidence. And that's what we, as adults, are aiming at: helping children use their freedom well, so they can mature into responsible, flourishing adults who have the courage and tools they need to navigate life's challenges.

This article by Karen E. Bohlin is reprinted from the *LifeCompass Blog* Sept. 18, 2019.

“I Am Angry Nearly Every Day of My Life”: What Marmee March Can Teach Us About Patience & Perfection



Writer and director Greta Gerwig’s 2019 movie adaption of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* earned six Academy Award nominations. In a moving scene pulled from the novel’s pages, Jo confesses to Marmee, “When I get in a passion I get so savage I could hurt anyone and enjoy it.” It’s a disquieting confession, but even more surprising is her mother’s reply, “You remind me of myself.”

Throughout the story, Marmee epitomizes the ideal mother: a kind, generous, practical and near saintly comfort to all. (“Call me Marmee. Everyone does,” the movie version of Marmee tells motherless Laurie upon meeting him.) It’s no wonder Jo is stunned by her mother’s admission. The audience is, too.

“But you’re never angry,” Jo presses.

“I’m angry nearly every day of my life.”

“You are?”

“I’m not patient by nature. But with nearly 40 years of effort I’m learning not to let it get the better of me.”

“Well, I’ll do the same then,” Jo quietly replies. She is clearly affected.

One of the hardest tasks for a screenwriter adapting a novel is choosing which scenes to include in the film. Other adaptations of *Little Women* have omitted this interchange. But in an age where the portrayal of perfection is a tempting aim – especially for girls and the women who raise them – the scene strikes a chord.

Marmee’s admission to Jo unzips our vision of perfection and reveals her true character as a person working daily to overcome her weaknesses and failures. In doing so, she reveals her faith in Jo’s ability to do the same. Marmee teaches us that

how we respond to others’ shortcomings can have a profound effect on how they see themselves and envision themselves in the future. In fact, Alcott writes that Jo felt “comforted at once by the sympathy and confidence given her.”

The scene also teaches us that we have more influence than we may guess. Writers know the most engaging characters are flawed. By sharing some of our own inner struggles and how we deal with them, we become more interesting and compelling to the children in our care. We may even become more sympathetic to their struggles, while inspiring in them courage, self-acceptance, and perseverance.

As Amy, the youngest of the March sisters later declares, “I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.” The message: our nature is the ship, but our character is the captain. We cannot control what ship we get or what seas we encounter, but we can learn from the captains that sail ahead of us how to best raise our sails and weather all storms.

This article by Seana Dorich is reprinted from the *LifeCompass Blog* Apr. 23, 2020.



Life Lessons from Behind the Soda Fountain

When I was fifteen years old, I worked as a waitress behind the soda fountain at a Norman Rockwell-esque ice cream parlor and homemade candy shop: Conrad’s Confectionery in Westwood, New Jersey.

Conrad’s was a delightful place. The regulars from town met at the counter each Saturday morning: the owners of the jewelry shop and the shoe store, the undertakers from the local funeral home, and the boy I had a crush on from the record shop. I grew confident in my skills and familiar with all the regulars’ names. I could make an excellent ice-cream soda, pour the perfect egg cream and keep the dishes washed and put away – even when it was busy.

I was on my game and confident.

My boss was a jolly, sixty-year-old man named Jimmy. He ran the store with his wife, Irene, who was usually found tending customers from behind the candy counter. One rule was paramount. Jimmy reinforced it regularly, and I trained all the new employees to follow it strictly. At the end of the long counter, beneath the cash register, was a trap door. The door led to a room below us, where the ice cream was freshly made. When they were ready to send up a bin, the folks making ice cream below would knock on the trap door. At the first knock, we would stop what we were doing, open the door, take the new bin and shut the trap door immediately.

The rule was clear: Always shut the trap door *before* moving on to a new task.

One bright Saturday afternoon, I was the only waitress bustling about serving ice-cream and coffee. I heard the familiar knock and quickly responded. Just as I lifted up a new bin of mint chocolate chip, a customer came in and shot me a smile. Taking pride in the fact that I knew his order by heart, I headed straight for the coffee pot. I had just started to pour, when Jimmy whizzed past me, chatting up the customers at the counter and walking backwards to the cash register to ring up someone’s purchase.

My heart leapt. “Jimmy!” I shouted. “Stop!”

It was too late. Jimmy had fallen in the trapdoor and was wedged between the basement and first floor thanks to his plump Santa’s belly. Two men leapt from their stools and bounded round the register. I dropped the coffee cup and dashed to help.

Three of us hoisted him up. Irene rushed from behind the candy counter to see what the commotion was all about. As Jimmy sat on the ground breathing heavily and clearly in pain, I stood mutely to the side.



Jimmy was alive but I was dying inside.

Irene shot me a look that finished it for me. I watched Jimmy speak weakly to her. She returned to the candy counter, grabbed her purse and enlisted a customer to help her accompany Jimmy to the car. Then she paused. Something softened. She walked right over to me, and said, “Karen, I need to leave you in charge of the store. I will be back as soon as possible.”

In the wake of my horrible mistake, she handed me more responsibility. Somehow, she trusted me with a second chance.

I closed the shop at the end of the day and slunk home to tell my parents what had happened. Then I called Jimmy at home.

“I am so sorry, Jimmy. It was all my fault. How are you?”
“I’m all right, just a few bruised ribs. Thanks for calling. I know you know what to do. I have confidence in you.”

I had blown it – and he still had confidence in me.

Jimmy and Irene taught me something powerful that day. Their legitimate first reaction – pain, anger, worry – was transformed into a very different response: I trust you. I have confidence in you. Their kindness and calm under the circumstances taught me more about leadership than any *Harvard Business Review* article: they showed me that greatness is revealed in how we choose to respond to stress.

I had known that Jimmy worked at Conrad’s when he was in high school. Perhaps that gave him some empathy for me as a high school kid. But when I read his obituary years later, I learned that Jimmy served as a Master Sergeant with General Patton’s Third Army in WWII shortly after high school. He was awarded the Bronze Star for heroic service.

Jimmy knew firsthand the kind of leadership and greatness young people were capable of: he had served and been demanded of on a grand scale. He wasn't simply giving me a second chance. He was helping me to envision a new possibility.

It's so tempting for us to *do* things for teenagers – from making their bed to writing their college essay. We care. But precisely because we care, let's press pause and make space for *them* to gain experience.

As a veteran educator, I can tell you that there is perhaps nothing that makes a young person grow and flourish more than authentic responsibility and trust.

Ownership of a task, the knowledge that other people are counting on us to carry it out, and the opportunity to learn from (not be crushed by) our mistakes – these inspire confidence in deep and abiding ways. Kids need to be needed. Let's keep that real for them and nurture their resilience, even when they blow it.

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Authors



Karen E. Bohlin, EdD, Director

Karen Bohlin, Founding Director of LCI and Head of Montrose School, is a recognized thought leader in the field of character and ethics education. Director Emerita and Senior Scholar at Boston University's Center for Character and Social Responsibility; co-architect of the National Schools of Character Program, Dr. Bohlin has served as advisor on character education nationally and internationally; a sabbatical fellow at the Jubilee Centre; an editorial reviewer and contributor to the *Journal of Character Education* and the *Journal of Education* at Boston University. She is author and contributing author of several books including *Teaching Character Education Through Literature: Awakening the Moral Imagination* (Routledge 2005), *Building Character in Schools* (Jossey-Bass 1999) and *Happiness and Virtue: Beyond East and West: Toward a New Global Responsibility* (Tuttle 2012). An important focus of her work in both the higher education and K-12 education is the development of practical wisdom in school leaders and teachers.



Deborah Farmer Kris, Associate Director

Deborah Farmer Kris is passionate about sharing the best research and practices that help parents and educators answer the question, "How can we help our children thrive?" Deborah works as a parenting columnist and consultant for PBS Kids, she writes about education for MindShift (an NPR education blog), and she is a senior associate at Boston University's Center for Character and Social Responsibility. Over the course of her career, Deborah has taught elementary, middle and high school, served as a school administrator, and directed a girls leadership institute. Her writing has been featured several times in *The Washington Post*, and she is the co-author of the book *Building Character in Schools: A Resource Guide*. A popular speaker, she has presented to hundreds of parents and educators around the country on topics related to character development.

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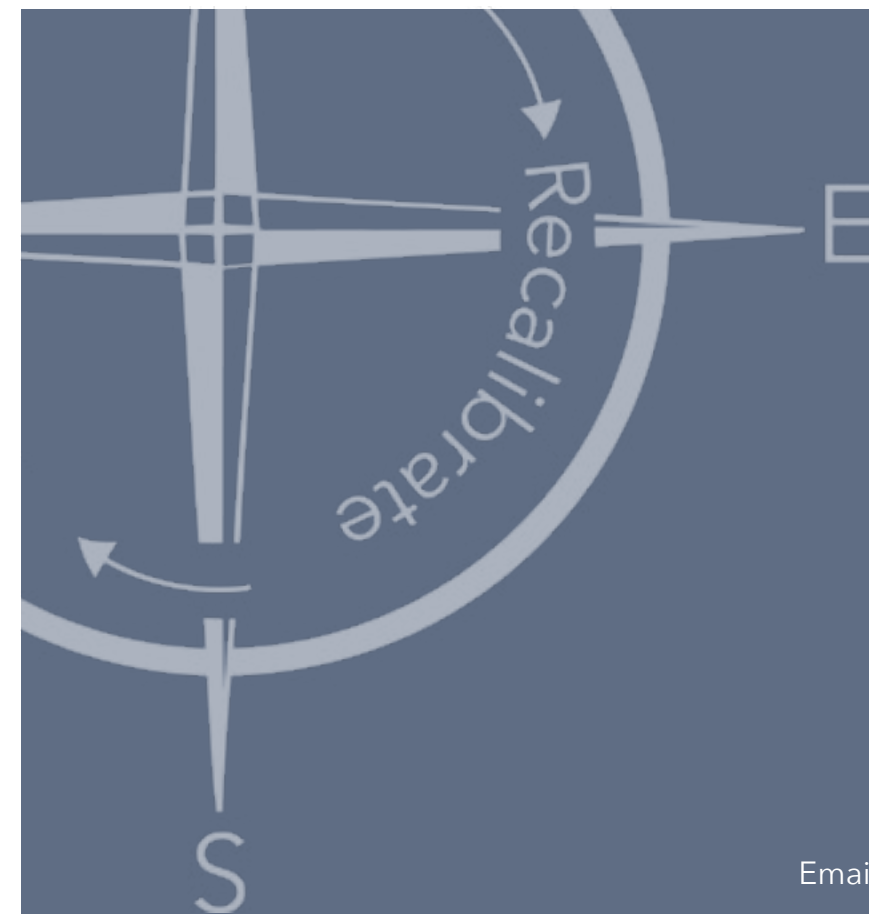
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For more information about
Stress Tests of Character Curriculum Resource
& the *LifeCompass* Institute for
Character & Leadership please contact:
Email: LCI Associate Director dkris@montroseschool.org



LifeCompass Institute for Character & Leadership
Montrose School
29 North Street
Medfield, MA 02052
508.359.2423
www.montroseschool.org/lci



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