

Host

Hello, Dr. Nandini, such an honour to have you talk to us today. You have been relentlessly working towards an inclusive future using SEL practices. Let me begin by asking you what are these practices? And why do they become more important for us in our day to day lives, both professionally and on a personal level?

Dr. Nandini

So hi, Charu. And it's very exciting to be able to talk to something that is so close to my heart, and has now become a way of life for me, I hope. So, I think if there's one thing that this pandemic has highlighted is the importance of face-to-face interaction, okay. And that brings to mind what is it that faces and people do to us, that becomes so important for us to think about it. So that's the social aspect of life. And I think humans are social beings. And that's a realization that we need to have, and this permeates our daily lives, whether we are at work or at home. So why does the social aspect of humanity play such an important role. And that's because the social aspects of humanity are linked to emotional aspects of life and emotions are related to reward, motivation, feeling sad, and almost make the purpose of life more relevant and important. So let me step back a little bit and, and give you some context about how we talk about this. If you think about it, humans make close to 30,000 decisions in a day, okay. And every decision that we make in a day has an element of emotion of feeling linked to it. So, whether we like it or not, emotions creep into the decisions that we make and these decisions are part of the interactions and the way we behave in life. And therefore, social and emotional learning needs to come into play, if we are consciously aware of the emotional states we are in, and that's something that I call emotional awareness, we will be able to take decisions after some thought. And we'll also be able to respond to people rather than react to people. And if we are able to respond to circumstances, to people, and to what's happening around us, in mindful manners, we will be able to behave in a way which is more flourishing, and which is more in conduction with people around us.

So that's where social and emotional learning has played such an important role, because it means it helps us ensure that our brain is in a state, where it can take the best possible decision in the given circumstance, whether it is at home when we are interacting with family, whether it is at work when we are interacting with colleagues, whether it is on the street when we are interacting with strangers. So, there are now specific competencies that we can build. And that's where cognitive neuroscience and brain imaging have played such an important role is that they have now provided the evidence for us on how the brain functions and thereby tells us that these are competencies that can be trained in human beings. Just like we can train people to read and write and do numbers. And therefore, this isolation, which was brought about by the pandemic, when we caught into unconventional, isolated situations, led to almost a fear or a panic of being lonely and disconnected. Because the rewards that we get out of being with people and with others were taken away from us. So therefore, we need to find other ways to ensure that life and everyday decision making becomes rewarding. And that's why social and emotional learning has gathered newfound importance today.

Host

I really like what you've talked about emotional awareness, responding to people rather than reacting. And, and this seems to be the thread across, you know, be it in a crisis situation, be it in any other situation and even in our day to day lives and how we channelize our emotions, because so tell me I think there's hardly anybody who doesn't get into a situation, if not every day, at least, you

know, a couple of times in a week with a colleague, with a friend with a, you know, with a relative or your partner or, or your anybody for that matter, anybody you interact with. So top most things to do, you would say, to stay calm in our day to day lives, you know, be it both professionally and personally.

Dr. Nandini

So, I think there are two points that I'd like to make here okay. One is how it is important for us, therefore, to regularly engage in what we call reflection, okay. So, when you have maybe a disagreement with somebody who's connected to you, whether at the level of a friendship, or a family member, it and if it ended on an unhappy note, it leaves a feeling within you, a dissonant feeling within you, okay. And in most circumstances, we try and brush it away, and hope that it will die a natural death. But dissonance and this is something again, we know from the neurosciences, are associated with negative memories, and negative memories are represented most strongly in the brain, as compared to positive memories. What we need to do instead is to consciously evoke positive memories, or positive associations that have happened, and bring them to the forefront so their memories become stronger. So that same individual with whom you had a disagreement, one hopes that you would have had a positive interaction with that person. So, if you could recall that positive interaction instead, and say, I didn't agree on this stage, but there are so many good things that have happened in the past. And maybe I can find a resolution to this, putting the positive memories on the top, as opposed to that one negative incident that might have happened.

That's one, so to constantly engage in reflection, and to try and arrive at a positive association that can help resolve the situation. The second is to also think about the whole notion of engaging in social and emotional learning, not just to lead more productive lives in terms of economics and finance, but also to lead more meaningful lives of what, at [MGIEP](#), we have now started to call flourishing, how can we ensure that human beings flourish in life, or thrive in life. And here, the framework that we have started to use is something that we designed in house, it's called the EMC square framework. And the idea is to build empathy, mindfulness, compassion and critical inquiry. And the core of this is that in order to flourish, you have to ensure wellbeing not only for yourself, but also for the other. The other can be a family member, the other can be your colleagues in office, it can be even a stranger on the road or somebody whom you meet in the metro train. Okay. And that comes back to the core of where we started this discussion is because we are a social species. So, we cannot thrive in isolation, we can thrive only when the collective thrives. And this is also because emotions are contagious. So, if I see you in a happy state, there is a very strong possibility that you're a friend that I will also resonate with that happiness. So, if we are able to build about positive emotions around us, those around us will also begin to benefit from it. And therefore, bringing in this social emotional learning into an everyday life and an everyday space becomes important, not just for yourself, but also for all that's around you.

Host

You know what you're talking about, it all seems so easy to follow but in reality, we seem so disconnected from all of this. And it sounds so simple and beautiful. And I think if these two very important points, engaging in reflection and flourishing are something which workplaces and even people, need to make it a habit and be make it very integral to our lives. Probably, that's why, we are facing so many issues related to mental health, and the conversations are moving towards wellbeing. And the good thing is that the conversations around mental health have become mainstream. But the, you know, the downside is that it's, it's a stark reality, which tells us that at

least, or if not more, 46%, of private sector employees report high stress levels because of their work. just want to understand, how can we use SEL practices to help the gap for better productivity?

Dr. Nandini

So I'll, I'll come back to another point, which I'd like to sort of put out there before we get into productivity. Again, that's a term that we are hoping to try and change, you know, rather than productivity, how can we begin to thrive so that the environment is such whether it's in the classroom or in the office, where you want to try and, you know, put in your best, but you're also encouraged and surrounded by, by feelings or discussions that encourage you to do that you're not constantly in competition with the world. And a quality that I want to talk about here, that is something that we specifically inculcate, and request people to inculcate is self-awareness. So how to be in touch with yourself. And to give a very simple example, if you're having a conversation with somebody else, again, family or colleague, and you don't agree with somebody, and without realizing, if you're not self-aware, you might actually begin to find the volume of your voice begin to rise. And that volume is already an indication that your emotional state is changing. Now, if you are self-aware, you will begin to already monitor that volume. Because after some point in time, the volume or the amplitude of the voice rather than the semantics begins to speak to the biology of the other person. So, the other individual begins to already hear you getting angry, without your words explicitly saying so, we call these articulatory gestures, these are things that begin to happen in our conversations. So, you often come away thinking, I didn't mean to be angry, I didn't mean to be rude. But something other than my words convey it. And if I was more aware of those changes or more aware of the physiological changes that were happening within me, which crept into my voice or my gestures, or my facial expression that began to get conveyed. And therefore, learning to read emotions, whether it is in the face or in the voice becomes an extremely important competency. So, emotion awareness, and emotion recognition, are both very useful skills to have over here.

It's very interesting, if you look at the literature to see how much you can convey about emotion and intent only through the eyes if you look at it. So, these are a couple of things which so far we have taken for granted that, you know, I can work with people and so I can read all the emotions, but sometimes we can't. And some explicit training in this becomes useful. So that's one point I wanted to make. A second thing was that about being mindful, and I just want, don't want to talk about mindfulness in terms of being in touch with your breath or engaging in, in deep breathing, but also to ensure that when you are participating in a conversation, you are in there in the present, and your mind is not wandering somewhere else. So, you are having a conversation, but you're actually thinking about something else. Those are again, not great situations. For relationships to flourish. And a third point, which we have found to be very helpful and beneficial in building good relationships is active listening. When we converse with each other, even before the first person has come to the end of the first sentence, we have already started to think about our own response, okay. And then our attention is caught up with formulating our own response, rather than thinking to what the other person is saying and paying enough attention to it. And more importantly, trying to pay attention without judgment, we call it active listening.

Again, what seems supposedly a very simple skill, but is very difficult to build it. Okay. So, like you said earlier, many of these are our competencies that we think we have already acquired along the way, and think we are able to practice them and implement them in our daily lives. But these constantly need work. And if we are able to decide for ourselves that I will make every conscious attempt to be, to reflect before I speak, to listen actively and carefully before I respond, and to pay attention to the interaction that's happening with me or around me, I think stresses will automatically take care of themselves. And if time permits, I would be happy to share three

instances or three examples or three activities that we have found to be very useful in maintaining calm during the pandemic. Do we have time for that?

Host absolutely. We'd love to know more about that.

Dr. Nandini

So, um, so one of the things we've been advocating, and this is, again, supported by the science is in a big way is, if we are able to find at least three times in the day, in a morning, afternoon, evening, or you can choose that, when you can spend five to seven minutes with yourself away from technology. So, you can listen to music, just stare into space, watch the birds, go for a walk, watch the flowers, spend a little time listening to yourself. It's very therapeutic. It might seem very pointless right now. But again, this is a practice, I would urge you to try and hope it can be beneficial. A second thing we have found very important and helpful is to engage in gratitude once in the day. So, to be thankful for, for family, for food, for friendship, for a job, for not having got COVID, for having recovered from COVID number of things. I mean, there's no end to what can what can be grateful for. But it's interesting, but engaging in gratitude over a period of time, activates a specific region in the brain, which helps the brain to be kinder and calmer. And thirdly is to do an act of kindness. Okay.

Remember early on, I talked about positive emotions. Now one of the nice things about doing an act of kindness is and this could be kindness for yourself, we call it self-compassion, compassion to others, do something else for somebody else, and also gratefully received compassion from others. And it could be something as simple as you know, not making a nasty comment when you wanted to. Making a cup of tea for everyone, when you are going to make one for yourself, asking an Uber driver about how their day was, you know, helping somebody cross the street. But doing an act of kindness activates reward pathways in the brain, similar to eating a good meal, eating a bar of chocolate or feeling happiness after a win. So, if you are able to activate those pathways in your brain, they are going to put you in a happy state of mind. And that itself is care of the stress to a large extent.

I am actually speechless Dr. Nandini over here today because I think if we were to adopt at least even 10% of what you've been talking about, I think we'll be able to make our workplaces far more better than you so much for talking to us.