

**Nurturing the Nurturer:
Neal Horen**

[Music]

Jonathan Faletti: And Neal will be our final presenter, and he's going to talk about you guys, the staff, nurturing the nurturer, because you're just as important as the kids. So if you guys aren't geared up and ready for the day, kids aren't going to be, so with that, Neal, the floor is yours.

Neal Horen: My mom was a preschool, kindergarten, pre-k teacher in the New York City schools for about 30 years, she'd come home and she'd fall asleep at like four o'clock in the afternoon. I was like, "What is wrong with this woman?" Until I started going into preschools, and pre-k's, and Head Start and Early Head Start, and I was like, "I don't know how she stayed up until four o'clock in the afternoon." It's hard work. I'm going to say something to you that you don't often hear, which is: I want you to take care of yourselves and I want you to think about yourselves for the next little bit of time. So let's start by just taking a breath. 'Cause so often we don't even have time during our day to take a breath. Let's just take one deep breath and then we'll get rolling.

We're going to come back to that, because I'm going to talk about three pieces today. I'm going to talk about wellness, I'm going to talk about stress – which I'm assuming many of you experience – and I'm going to talk about what you do about that. In the little bit of time we're probably not going to solve every single thing that's going on in your life. If I could do that, I'd probably be a really wealthy person, and I am. So let's talk a little bit about this. We'll talk about wellness. We'll talk about some of the areas that need to be nurtured. And we'll talk about nurturing the nurturer. And if I have to say that too many times, it's not going to come out right. So we'll talk first about a flat tire. We were talking about driving, and as somebody who has an hour and a half commute each way and spends a lot of time exercises some of my fingers, what is it about having a flat tire – who's had a flat tire at some point? Yeah, almost all of us. And I'm sure, like me, first step is you cry. And then you start to realize things are not going well. So these are amongst the things that can happen to you when you have a flat tire when you're driving. It's not different when we have our own flat tire internally. It makes it difficult for us to keep going. It makes it more bumpy.

And so when you're stressed, when you're not well, it's like having a flat tire. And you can't change yourself completely, but you certainly can address some of these issues. So what's interesting to me as I thought about wellness, one of the things that I've always been struck by is that there's some work done by the National Indian Child Welfare Association that is not about a western model of you're either well or you're not well and it's a straight linear sort of process. It's really a circular process. And they talk about the relational world view and having a balance. And so as we, at the National Center on Health, have thought about wellness, we've explored a lot of different ways to think about this. And so one of the ways that we've done this is we've thought, when you ask people about wellness – and some of this you can see well, some you can't. But when you think about wellness, what comes to your mind? Because we all define this differently.

So if I said to you: What is wellness for you? You would say – this is the interactive part, so then you're going to answer me, so you ready?

So when I say: What do you think about wellness? What comes to mind? Balance, feeling good, healthy choices, contentment. Okay, so you'll see up here that there's a number of different concepts that go into wellness, and it's not just either "I'm well" or "I'm not well." And so I want to talk about this a little bit. It's about an absence of illness, hopefully. It's also about growth and about balance. And a couple years back, we were out in California and we saw these trees. And I think about the growth that occurs, and over time what happens. And we are constantly thinking about how we grow. It doesn't often feel like that when you are getting up at five in the morning, racing to work, dealing with what you're dealing with at work, racing home, dealing with what you have to deal with at home. But if you can stop for a second – and that's all I'm asking today is just maybe take a minute or two to think about yourself and your growth and your balance. It took me a long time to put those rocks together and take the picture. But I want you to think about this.

And so the folks at Northwest Missouri State have a really interesting concept in terms of wellness. And so they don't just talk about physical wellness. Right? So some of you talked about contentment, some of you talked about balance. These are six areas. This is not the only way to think about wellness, but what an interesting way to start to expand how you think about whether you're well or you're not well. And those aspects of who we are really vary in terms of the importance for all of us. So there are some of you in this room that are like, "I don't really care about social wellness. I really care about spiritual wellness." There are others who don't care much about your spiritual wellness. You care about your occupational wellness. So I'll give you a little bit about each of these and just start to think about this. So when we think about social wellness, we think about relationships and community interaction. We think about how we relate to others and how we connect and communicate. And for some of us, this is a really important piece of our lives.

We really like to spend time with our friends. We really like to interact with folks. For others of us, we like to sit in our little man cave and be away from folks for a little bit. This is one dimension. And so as you're starting to think about yourself – I gave you permission for 15-20 minutes to think about yourself. Then you're going to go back and get on your phone. You're going to go back to your home or your hotel room and you're going to start to think about everything else. But think about yourself in terms of your social wellness. How are you doing? Do you have enough social connectedness? Do you feel like, "I used to have lots of time to spend with friends and I don't anymore, I wish I had more time." Spiritual wellness. Again, when I set the camera up, it was hard for me, because I had to get in this – I had to run back into this position. And I know you look at me like, "Boy, this guy's in shape. That must be really hard for him." But spiritual wellness is really about peace and harmony, and about values, and discovering meaning and purpose in life.

And it may include an aspect of religion, but it's broader than that. And again, for some of you in the room, this is it. When you think about whether I'm well or not, it's really about your relationship in terms of spiritual relationships, in terms of finding meaning in life and things like that. For others, it may not be necessarily quite as important. This is about emotional wellness. So are you in touch with your feelings? Do you really spend enough time dealing with your own emotions or do you just try and get through the day? We all have emotional challenges in our lives. And part of this, in terms of wellness, is how much we feel like we're able to cope with those. Occupational wellness or financial wellness. And so this is really about having some balance between work and the rest of your life. It's about finding fulfillment in your work. This is usually when people start laughing in the audience, because some folks don't find fulfillment in their work, and some folks this is the most important aspect of their lives. So

again, I'll remind you – because we have a couple more we'll talk about – but each of these are about where you're at. There's not a right or a wrong answer. There's not either you're a 10 or you're a 0. It's all about your individual sense of how you're doing in all these areas. Intellectual wellness, being a lifelong learner.

If you're here this week, you're learning. Even if you're not, we're going to try and force it down your throat in the next 10 minutes. But part of this is about being open to new experiences. Professional development, learning new skills. That's an aspect of wellness. And then last but certainly not least is obviously physical wellness, which several of you mentioned, in terms of making healthy choices and things like that. But taken together those six dimensions are one way of thinking about wellness. And as I said when we started, I want you to think about yourself and how you're doing in all those areas. And oftentimes we would spend more time – we'd really go in depth in all of those. But for today's purposes I just want you to think about, "Boy, do I have sort of a balance in all those? Or if I spent all my energy on my physical wellness?" Not a bad thing to spend your energy on. But have I neglected certain areas of my wellness? A couple things that I don't think are surprising for you is you're involved in an intense, demanding job.

We heard about stress. We heard about that it can take a toll on your health. The one thing that we didn't talk a lot about is that it actually impacts everyone around you. It actually impacts the children that you work with. Researchers found that the more stressed that a teacher is, the more challenging behavior that they actually experience. It's sort of a vicious cycle. And while stress is natural, it can really take a toll on your health and your effectiveness. It also interferes with decision-making. And if I think about a job where you have to make decision after decision after decision, it's this work. And if you're stressed, that's going to get in the way. And if you understand what stress is, what your stress is, and what you can do about it, you have a much better shot of being able to get that back in balance. So, as we heard, it can be a good thing; it can also be harmful. But it's really about a situation or a thought that makes you feel frustrated, nervous, anxious, or angry. Now the interesting thing about that is whatever makes you nervous, anxious, or angry may not be the thing that makes me nervous, anxious, or angry.

So I'll tell you a quick story. So I have three children. I had them rather quickly. We have twins and a child who is months older. So three little kids in the house at the same time. I had a colleague who had one child. Had a colleague, their child was pretty easygoing. My children are a little rambunctious. And so a colleague comes over and the children are upstairs, completely unsupervised of course. All kinds of developmental mistakes I was making. But they're running around, they're making lots of noise, and my colleague is like, "What's going on?" I'm like, "I don't know." She's like, "What do you mean you don't know?" I go, "I don't know. I think it's okay." And she's getting very upset about this. She's like, "Shouldn't you go upstairs?" I'm like, "I'm not going upstairs; they'll come down." She's like, "What?" And then she goes upstairs, it made her very upset. She was very stressed by it, I was not. Part of it was I was used to it, I had three very young children. They ran around a lot. They had a lot of energy, all the kinds of things that come with that.

But that definition of stress is really important, because part of what happens – and we heard this a little bit today – is if you think it's stressful and no one else does, you're going to react in a certain way and everyone's just sort of standing around like, "What's happening?" Same thing with the children. So in that situation where the two children are fighting over a...Swiffer? Part of it is that teacher didn't seem overly stressed, did she? She was sort of like, "I know what to do. I'm going to get down on their level.

I'm going to follow everything that Amy Hunter says, I'm going to get down on their level I'm going to talk in a calm voice. I'm going to put my hand up if he puts his hand back." That didn't stress her out. But there are also folks who get very stressed out by that, when they see aggression, those kinds of things.

And so part of this is keeping in mind that it's something that makes you feel frustrated, nervous, anxious, or angry. Boy, if there's three things – I always like to think if you can hear somebody talk for a little bit and maybe take one, two little nuggets, three is a bonus. But here's one. Your thoughts impact your behavior. And stress comes from your perception of the situation. That's what makes it stressful. And sometimes we're right and sometimes we're wrong. And there was something on some sort of social media that talked about just think about where that person was right before this happened. And the more we start to think about where they were at and how we may actually be wrong about what's going on between the two of us. So sometimes we're right and sometimes we're wrong. And let me talk a little bit about thoughts, and then we'll sort of talk about the connection here. Here's some unhelpful patterns of thinking that every single one of us has engaged in at some point. All or nothing thinking. Well if I don't do this, it's never going to work. I guess sometimes that's true, but a lot of times it's not.

Catastrophizing: This is the worst thing that could ever happen.

Personalization: That everything's about you, or over generalization. These are unhelpful patterns of thinking. And the more we engage in these kinds of patterns of thinking, the more likely we are to be stressed by what's happening. So part of what I want you to keep in mind is that there are these unhelpful patterns of thinking that we engage in.

And then start to think about: how often am I doing these kinds of things? Because here's one of the key things that we'll go over today. There's a connection here between the way you think, how you feel, and what you do. And these fancy-shmancy arrows tell you it goes in any direction. So it could be what you do affects your thinking, which affects your mood or emotion, or the complete opposite way. But let's just start at the top and work our way through. So "There's no point in even trying," is a thought that somebody has. And that's an example of all or nothing thinking. And when somebody thinks there's no point in even trying, how are they going to feel? They're going to feel like that it's not working. Right? What's the use, that's a great example. They're going to feel like, what's the use? And that's going to lead them to certain behaviors, which is, "Maybe I shouldn't even try. I'm just going to avoid people because what's the use?

And so there's really no point in trying because I've been avoiding people." And you can see we just keep going around and around in this kind of a circle. So if I replace that thought with, "Maybe there's something I can do," how might I feel? Sorry, that was a question, I'll try it again. "How might I feel? Right?" If I say it in a high voice and I tilt my head, it's a question. How might you feel? You might feel hopeful, good. Now we're getting somewhere. Right? So you might feel hopeful and if you feel hopeful, what might you do? You might do something, you might take a step. And if you take a step, you might feel like, "That worked out okay," which – okay. That's really important. So I'm going to hammer it home 10 more times. There's a connection between all of this. There's a connection for children that we work with and there's a connection for us. And if we're going to nurture ourselves, we have to start to pay attention. Because when we're engaging those unhelpful patterns of thinking, this is what can happen.

The other piece that I hear a lot is about control. When we focus on things that are out of our control, like how people respond to you, we end up feeling a little stressed. It's when we focus on what's in our

control that we feel a lot better. You can focus on your ability to prioritize work, not the big pile of work that somebody's going to give to you. It's out of your control. You can get frustrated, but you're not going to get much done. When you focus on the things that are in your control, that's pretty nurturing, because you start to feel like you have some power. You start to feel like you have some control. The times that you start to feel like, "There's nothing I can do about this," is when you feel like, "This person is doing this to me." You have no control over that. So the more you focus on the things that are in your control, the more your stress will go down. Will it disappear... if I could do that, I'd do it. If I had some dust in here, I'd throw it out and I'd de-stress you. Stress is natural.

Part of it, though, is: How are you thinking about it? What are you doing about it and what are you focusing on? So, the other thing to do is to think about how you talk back to your thoughts, and we probably do this. Right? So we're trying to get on the highway and that all the people don't seem to be letting us on. I don't know if you know this but no one's meeting secretly four exits back and saying, "Let's not let him on the highway." It may feel like that, and they are for me. So you start to talk back like, "Well that's silly. That's a personalization thing I'm doing here." I'd still do it, but the more you start to talk back and say, "That's not a thought that's going to help move me forward. That's not going to nurture me. That's just going to make me stuck here," the better off you're going to be. And having a flexible approach. Because that's the other piece is strategies to reduce stress.

Sometimes I'll have folks that'll say, "What helps you decrease your stress?" And somebody'll say, "Gardening." Not a lot of mobile gardens these days. You can't take them out in the middle of the day and just start gardening. So you have to have four or five strategies. So last week we were talking about this, somebody said going for a run. I don't know how your workplace is but you're not allowed to strip down in our place – I mean you are, but you get in trouble. But if you strip down and go for a run, you might get in trouble. But if you have four or five different strategies, you're much more likely to address that stress.

Coping strategies: Here's the best part about this is as Amy was talking, and as Colleen was talking, I kept thinking about there's a lot about coping. And we spend so much time trying to help children learn how to cope and learn these emotions and learn how to deal with them, and we don't spend any time doing it ourselves. We're okay getting frustrated, we're okay getting mad. We don't have to have some imaginary little toolbox with coping strategies in it, just the children in the room do. Create one for yourself. Think about, when you leave here, how many coping strategies do I have? For many of you, you may be out of town, and so you can't even access some of the things that you typically would when you're at home. "This is what I do when I'm at home." Well you're not, you're here. What's in your toolbox, what can you do? Who's listening to jazz, who's going for a walk? Who's getting a cup of coffee? Which is probably not the most relaxing thing apparently, but I'm not a real doctor so I don't know, but that might help.

Here's just – these are sort of – hopefully you know this. But these are the kinds of every day strategies to reduce stress that we would hope that people already know. And I'd ask you – much as I did when we started – think about yourself. Are you doing any of these things? Okay, and how many of them and how often? And how many days go by where you don't use any of them and you're feeling stressed? Two last things, in terms of nurturing. Again, we do these two things with children and we don't spend nearly as much time. I started tonight by saying, "Let's take a breath." It's the one thing you actually could probably do almost every place. It's pretty easy, we've been doing it a long time. It involves very simple

parts of the brain. Taking a breath, controlled breathing, and then actually comparing the fact that there's thinking that you're doing. So thinking about relaxing and slowing down and imagining yourself letting all your thoughts float away. Or sometimes when I work with children or with adults I'll say imagine that you're sweeping all the thoughts out your head. Just sweep them all out until it's empty in there. Not easy to do and then be taking your breaths. And then lastly is, again, something you really could do is a progressive muscle relaxation. So everybody hold your hands out, your arms out, and squeeze and hold it for a second, and feel how tense your arms are, and then let go. And feel the difference between what it feels like to be tense and what it feels like to be relaxed in just one part of your body. And what we typically would do is I would work with you and take you through each part of your body, tense and relax. And there's actually, on another website, the ecmhc.org website, there's actually guided visual imagery and audio guidance on this, on those two techniques. Now when we talk about nurturing the nurturer, if you do deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation, should you be fine? I'd like to think so. I'm going to guess that it might not be the, be all end all, but if you just did those two things every day, and you thought about your thinking patterns, it'll be good first steps. That's really what it is, is trying to appreciate. We started by talking about breathing and appreciation. Appreciate that you actually have to take care of yourself. Lots of burnout, lots of turnover, lots of stress in this work. And the more you start to think about yourselves and nurture yourselves, the more effective you're going to be.

[Applause]

[End video]