

Ep #169: Life Coaching Tools for Communication and Connection with Kari Ann Atkinson



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Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to Episode 169.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. A not-so-typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach, Angela Kelly Robeck.

Happy Tuesday and welcome to the podcast my empowered leaders. As you know we have been talking about the idea of connection throughout the month. And I've been interviewing tons of fun people. And today I have another interview with Kari Ann Atkinson. Kari is a certified life coach and a tenured college professor. So she is an educator in secondary ed. And as a mom with two young adult daughters, including one with special needs, she fully understands the unique challenges and struggles that parents in similar situations face.

Kari Ann uses her expertise and experience to help her clients in achieving their best life possible by helping them improve their relationships, manage overwhelm and reduce anxiety. So Kari basically is a certified life coach who's also an educator. And she really specializes in helping parents of special needs children. Kari Ann, welcome to the podcast.

Kari Ann: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Angela: So excited to have you here. So Kari and I connected through The Life Coach School. We're both certified educators and certified coaches out here trying to help all of the people. So Kari, tell the listeners about your

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story, how you landed in education, where you are today and the work that you offer to families.

Kari Ann: Alright. So I landed in education not in a super exciting way. In my undergrad I was doing PR and marketing and I realized I hated it and was offered a full-time job with a pretty large salary at a very young age of 21. I decided to go against it and I was encouraged to go to graduate school. And it was my first classroom as a TA, a teacher's assistant, I had my own classroom though when I was 22 that I realized that teaching was it. I literally walked in that very first day and walked out at the end of one class and said, "This is what I'm meant to do."

So that was, oh God, 21 years ago is when it happened. So I've been teaching for a long time. I absolutely love my job. I love educating people. I really believe that I was called to do this. And then in the middle, of course, of life, life happens and I had two beautiful daughters, one of them like you mentioned, with special needs.

And it wasn't until several years ago I was faced with a pretty rare medical condition. I actually contracted a rare bacteria in my lung and was diagnosed with cavitary lung disease. And by the time the diagnosis happened, it took about a year to get diagnosis, I had a hole in my lung the size of a man's fist.

Angela: Wow. Oh my gosh.

Kari Ann: Right. Because of this I wasn't able to work for about a month. And I was just kind of feeling sorry for myself, and struggling, and was in a lot of my own drama. And that's how I discovered life coaching. I was turned on to Brooke Castillo's podcast, got hooked and got my own life coach. And about a year later I decided I am also meant to do this. So I

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went through the certification program and became a certified life coach and now I have two amazing professions. And yeah, I just, I love what I do every single day.

Angela: So you're doing both?

Kari Ann: I'm doing both, yeah, with full-time tenured college professor and I also have an almost full life coach practice.

Angela: And tell me about your teaching practice, what are you teaching at the college level?

Kari Ann: So I teach communication studies which really the pedagogy there really is in alignment with the LCS pedagogy. I primarily teach interpersonal communication, argument and debate, organizational communication and intercultural communication. So it's a lot of relationship kind of based communication classes that I'm able to really kind of seamlessly intertwine the life coach tools and the communication content in both practices, in both teaching and in my life coaching.

Angela: They're totally related and I'm sure my listeners out there right now would love to hear some communication tips because they're in the business. Here's the thing, life coaching is teaching. And teaching is life coaching. It's all intertwined and what you're doing is really just using these tools and strategies specific to life coaching and showing people how they apply to all of the other areas within their life and their careers.

Kari Ann: Exactly. That's exactly, yeah.

Angela: Yeah, exactly. And this is why this is so important and I want to highlight this, that people either don't know what life coaching is and the

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minute that they're open to it, exposed to it, they kind of question it because it sounds funny, it's new, it's different. When you hear life coaching it sounds like I should be able to know how to run my life. Why would I need somebody to coach me through my life? Yet here we are as humans all on the planet just trying to figure out how to live life, and how to have a career, and how to create work life balance, how to communicate effectively.

And we're all trial and error struggling through this, so what life coaching does really is it just provides you tools to help frame the way you think about situations, the way you communicate those thoughts and feelings. And the way you approach decision-making, it's all one and the same.

Kari Ann: Yeah. The way you talk to other people, the types of relationships that you have, the way you manage people, the way you lead, all of that comes down to the tools that you're using or frankly not using.

Angela: Yeah. So can you share how do you, like what's a life coaching tool or strategy that you weave into your communication, conversations with your students?

Kari Ann: Well, I think the biggest one of course is that our – and this is actually in our textbooks in interpersonal communication. But the concept that your thoughts create your feelings and your feelings drive your action. And so one of the key things, in fact I was just talking to a couple right before talking with you is that the way that you perceive somebody, the thoughts you have about them are what dictate whether or not your impression of your relationship is good or bad.

So if say we have a really unhealthy or we have a dysfunctional relationship, or I'm in a bad relationship it's because of the thoughts that you're having about the other person or about the way you're

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communicating. And the other person can be completely blindsided by this because in their mind everything's great, it's hunky-dory.

Angela: Yeah, exactly.

Kari Ann: Because they have positive good thoughts about the other person and about the relationship. And so I think the main thread of everything comes back to the way that we think and the way that we're managing what we're thinking. And how life coaching really comes into play is it takes somebody on the outside to show you what is actually going on inside of your mind. That's why most of us coaches, I'm sure you have a coach, I have a coach.

Angela: Yes, absolutely, I have several coaches.

Kari Ann: Exactly. I call it mental hygiene. I know a lot of people call it mental health or mental wellness. In my experience there's a stigma attached to the term 'mental health', so I like to think of it as mental hygiene. Just like you brush your teeth to make sure you don't get cavities and you can enjoy your food, well, you need to make that sure you are mentally doing what you need to do to have a good day, to have interesting good perspectives, to make the decisions. And that's what life coaching does, it helps you see what's going on in there so you can make good decisions.

Angela: That's a really good way to frame it. I'm always trying to think of different ways to help people see the value of coaching because of the stigma associated especially when you say mental health. If you say emotional health, people are like, "What?" But if you say mental health they're like, that's a kind of a taboo thing because mental health means that you're either healthy or you're not. It's kind of an all or none thinking. And if

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you're not, that's a taboo place to be. And there are labels that we call people that we think are struggling with their mental health.

So I love the idea of hygiene and just a regular cleaning, daily cleaning is how I like to practice my mental hygiene. But I also like to use it in terms of mental fitness. I think of it like having a fitness coach, nobody has a stigma if you hire a fitness coach. So it's really mental and emotional fitness.

Kari Ann: No. That's exactly right. And it's a daily practice. I think that's the key too is it's a daily practice. It's work. I was talking to a client that we've been working together now for 20 weeks and she's like, "It's still work." And I said, "Absolutely, it's still work and because you're still a human being." [inaudible] to be something different.

Angela: Yeah, exactly. Just today I was coaching a client and I've had this client since – he signed on last April. So we're close to a year now. And he said, "Wait, what, I have to feel my feelings? These are coming from my thoughts?" And he said every single time it's like a brand new aha every single coaching session because it's a new – you're thinking about a new situation in a different way.

And it always, it seems to catch people off guard every single time until they realize yes, thoughts create emotions, emotions create the impact I have on my decisions and my actions, yeah, so that's really fun. So how do you see life coaching tools as the solution for school leaders specifically when it comes to mental wellness and connection with teachers and support staff?

Kari Ann: So I think it's crucial. I mean if we just want to use right now, the current situation with the pandemic and everything just as an example. I think of it kind of like a trickledown effect or a trickle, something doesn't

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trickle up. But when you have say students that are frustrated, and then parents who are frustrated and overwhelmed because they're dealing with – well, we all know what we're all dealing with. We're dealing with working from home and all these changes. And then the parents go to the teachers and are trying to rely on the teachers.

And the teachers are overwhelmed and frustrated because they might have their own kids, they have their own stuff that they're dealing with and they're trying to teach from home. And they're frustrated and overwhelmed, and the support staff, especially are overwhelmed. And then they go to a leader, a principal let's say, an assistant principal. And if that assistant principal or principal has not been practicing mental hygiene they are going to be frustrated and overwhelmed. Now you have everybody who's frustrated and overwhelmed and nobody can help anybody, not really.

So I do think it's so important that leaders at the top really learn the tools and learn how to manage what's going on in their life and with just all the chaos that is happening. And I have an example of this. When the pandemic hit and we had to transition from face-to-face classes to online classes I had never taught online before. I am technologically challenged. I almost can't even say the word. So the idea of taking all of my classes and 150 students from face-to-face to online at first was like oh my gosh, how are we going to do this?

And everyone around me was kind of freaking out and it just kind of took a moment once I realized that this is what was going to happen and realized that everything is figure out-able. Everybody else around me is just overwhelmed, and stressing out, and spinning out, and having meltdowns literally. And I was super calm. Now, I'm going to be honest with you. Had this happened about 10 years ago I would have been in the same boat, I would have been spinning and freaking out too.

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But because I had these tools I was able to just kind of self-coach and able to get all of my ducks in a row. I sat down and wrote out my plan and realized that I didn't have to have A plus work which is super weird as a college professor. I was like, "You know what? B minus work is just great here." And my students just kind of rolled with it and I helped them kind of in their transition as well. And then because of the tools that I have as a life coach I just was able to kind of reach out and help people.

When I saw or recognized that somebody was really struggling, you don't force yourself on people but I would just say, "Hey, how are things going? Are you doing okay?" Just kind of checking in with them, and because we were all kind of experiencing this craziness, people were really honest and opened up. And then I was able to offer help if they needed it. And it just kind of brought back to light how much these tools really do impact your life. I think as a life coach I take that for granted.

And then when something very human happened I realized gosh, I really do use these tools all the time. And I wish everybody had these tools.

Angela: I know. Well, a couple of things that you said really stood out to me. Number one is that because you were able to self-coach yourself, and in a minute I'm going to ask you the exact thoughts you were thinking. But what really stood out to me was that you said, "There was chaos all around me but I felt calm." And that's because you were able to ground yourself. But you also said, "I was able then to help my students." And what I want the leaders to glean from that is when you are calm and when you have grounded yourself, one, you're more ready able to help other people.

And two, your energy is contagious. So when you are calm then the students are calm, and teachers are calm and that, like the work that you

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do to ground yourself can really have this ripple effect out to the entire school culture and community, right?

Kari Ann: Absolutely, yeah.

Angela: Yeah. So what were the exact thoughts? So for those of you who listen to the podcast, you know I talk about the stair cycle which in The Life Coach School we call the model. I just have a different name for it. But it's the same exact tool and it really comes down to your thoughts, what you're thinking. And we're going to ask Kari what she's thinking about to generate calm, but your thoughts generate that emotional response. And then that shifts the way that you approach whatever it is you have to do.

So, Kari, what were your thoughts when you were going through the process of transitioning into remote learning? And how did you stay calm in such a tumultuous time?

Kari Ann: So to be perfectly transparent, my very first thought was oh my God, what am I going to do? Just like everybody else.

Angela: That was everybody's first thought.

Kari Ann: That was everybody's first thought. And as I was thinking about this and I just kind of took a deep breath and I thought everything is figure out-able, that's kind of my go to thought, is everything is figure out-able. And I just had to have some patience in figuring it out. And that's when I just sat down and said, "Okay, so what are the nuts and bolts of this? What are the first things that I need to do?"

And what's so interesting is when I had some colleagues reach out to me because they noticed that I was doing well. And they were asking me and

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most of them don't even know I'm a life coach, some of them do. They're like, "How are you doing this?" And so actually did, worked with them and did some sessions with them just to help. And everyone kind of were having the same thoughts of I don't know what to do, this is so overwhelming. And they just got so mired in the stress that they couldn't see their way out of it.

And so we just, you know, it was like 20, 30 minutes of talking people through and helping them kind of separate the facts from their thoughts. And helping them really kind of wrap their mind around a better way to frame things, helped them move forward, helped them kind of get out of that frozen in fear, or spinning, or just spinning kind of a thing. So that was the thought is that everything is figure out-able.

And then in times when I got really frustrated because there were times when I would be trying to figure out something, Google something, it wasn't working. I kind of felt like I was going in circles, I would just take a deep breath and just remind myself, I've got this. This may take a little longer than I had planned for but I've got it, it's going to be fine. And then I would always come up with a plan B. Okay, if this doesn't work, what's my plan B? And sometimes I had to use a plan B, but that's okay, that's life.

Angela: Yeah. Just giving yourself permission to say, "This is going to take a little longer than I normally take to get things done." Most principals out there are super efficient. They're used to being able to get a lot done. But when the systems in which you're used to working around and working in, change, there has to be this grace of one, I'm not going to get to everything like I did and in the same way. And it might take me a little bit longer and that's okay.

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Kari Ann: Right. And that leads me to think about something else, especially in terms of say principals, is we have a set way. I mean even as a professor, we have these set ways that we do things because that's how we've always done them.

And when you get a curveball you can either kind of resist and fight against that or you can look at it as an opportunity to learn a different way to do something, to look at something from a different perspective. And the leaders who are more equipped or better equipped to handle things like that are better able then to give support to the people around them that need it.

Angela: Yeah, exactly. So I love the mindset of it's figure out-able. And I have to ask you this just because I know this keeps coming up, for any teachers listening out there or for school leaders who are trying to support teachers with this question, in the spirit of connection and empathy with students. I'm thinking for school leaders, their staff is kind of like their classroom, their set of students. And a lot of people have discussed this, their thoughts about student engagement. How people are being engaged.

And as a professor you are having to notice whether or not students are engaging and to what capacity and level they're engaging. What are some of your thoughts – and granted, I understand because you're a professor you're working with young adults versus young children. But what are your thoughts about engagement in a remote learning situation that might help serve school leaders and help them support their teachers with just having an appropriate level of expectation around engagement and connection from a remote standpoint?

Kari Ann: My thought is that it is more challenging for students, especially younger students to be engaged. I still have that issue with my college age

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students because I've noticed that some of them will be driving in the car as they're Zooming on class, or Zooming in class. And I'm like, "You're not supposed to Zoom and drive, for multiple reasons." And so I think that it's just kind of laying out especially ahead of time, if you can get ahead of it with parents. And having more reasonable expectations of how long teachers are expecting their students to be 'engaged' for.

So maybe in the classroom, and I'm used to – my sister's a fourth grade school teacher. And so I understand kind of from her some of the challenges where kids constantly have to keep going, going, going otherwise they just get distracted and they lose interest and things like that. So I think that in terms of engagement it's coming up with strategies to help teachers do shorter bits of focused time. And trying to get as much as you can the online classroom to emulate the in person classroom.

So having fun questions in the middle of something or having students get out there and clap their hands and be silly and do it. It's really trying to shift your mindset in terms of creativity when it comes to keeping people engaged and then adjusting your expectations. What is reasonable for a fourth grader to sit and be day-after-day hour-after-hour in Zoom? Especially with everything going on in their home life, you don't know what's going on in their home life.

Angela: Right, yeah. Just that bringing to the table a lot of empathy, a lot of compassion and not just for the other people but allowing yourself to not be cracking down on the teachers or not be cracking down on students. Because the expectation from God knows who to be honest with you, thinks that we should be administering a state test during a pandemic, which is ridiculous. You don't have to buy into that even when people above you are saying, "There's a huge learning gap and there's a big loss this year." When everyone's in panic mode and kids are falling further behind and we have to measure the – do the test or whatever.

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You don't have to absorb that panic. You can still choose to be like, "Here's the reasonable set of expectations and I'm going to be a filter for my teachers and my kids, my students that we're going to bring this down a notch and we're going to stay calm. And we're going to be realistic about the truth of what's happening here." And acknowledge, "Hey, we're in a remote situation, people have got all kinds of things going on at home and we're in a pandemic. Hello." Let's be realistic about that.

Kari Ann: Yeah. I like that you brought up the idea of empathy because – so empathy is really putting yourself in the other person's shoes, it's trying to see things from a different perspective. And that sounds easy to do and in reality unless you've been through something it's very difficult. And I was thinking about this. I hear a lot of times people say, "We're all in the same boat." I don't think that's true. We're not in the same boat.

We might be in the same body of water but we have some people who are in a yacht. There's other people who are in a dinghy. There's somebody that's in a canoe that has holes in it and they're sinking. And so we're actually in different boats. And the boat that you're in affects and impacts the experience that you're having in that ocean and that body of water.

Angela: Yes, such a beautiful analogy, yes.

Kari Ann: And you don't know. And so what we tend to do is we tend to think that our boat is what their boat is because that's our frame of reference. And so speaking as a professor, speaking as a mom of a college aged special needs child, my oldest daughter, I don't remember if we mentioned this, has autism. And she has some intellectual disabilities. I also have a typical daughter. Everyone's boat is different. And most people you can't tell from the outside. Most people unless they ask me they don't know all the crap that I deal with at home.

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And I say crap, you know what I mean? All the stuff that goes with special needs, because I'm a happy person, I'm very positive. But I still go through hard stuff too. But people don't recognize that because they just kind of look at what's on the outside. And so especially for principals and teachers to just kind of try and keep that in perspective that your boat is not their boat.

Angela: I love that so much. And I remember you and I on a previous call prior to the podcast we talked about this idea of normal, remember that? What tips can you share with the listeners to help them through the process of letting go of what used to feel normal and create this sense of certainty as they leave schools through some of these major mindset shifts? And just this idea of what our normal is, what we perceive as normal in our boat is definitely not the same normal that other people are experiencing. So I would love your take on that.

Kari Ann: Right. So that's a big one.

Angela: It is a big question so whatever way you want to go with it, run with it. I just love your brain and I'm trying to pick it all apart.

Kari Ann: No worries. So the first thing I want to talk about is certainty. So obviously we all kind of know this but there really is no such thing as certainty, not in terms of circumstances, events that happen. And I think that we kind of get lulled into this idea when things kind of go the same, day after day, after day that we're certain that it's going to be like that tomorrow. But clearly that's not how life happens. But in terms of how you handle things there can be certainty.

And so I think that really when you look at principals, and teachers, leaders, you need to be certain that you can lead your people through whatever

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storm is going to happen. So I think that's where the certainty comes in, because all of us are looking to our leaders to reassure us, to let us know that hey, we're going to get through whatever it is we're going to get through. So I think that's where the certainty comes in, in having confidence that you're going to be able to handle whatever comes your way.

And I guess further than that, how do we equip ourselves to feel certain, to feel confident that we can get through whatever? I think first as a leader you need to do your own mind shift. So one of the parts of your question was how do we help people through this, through these major mindset shifts? Well, first the leader has to have the mindset shift. That has to happen with them first. And so you need to gain some perspective, acknowledge that the old normal had its good parts but it wasn't all roses.

We oftentimes remember the old normal as almost like the rose colored lenses. It wasn't like that, the old stuff. There was still bad stuff in there too. There was still challenges and difficulties. But see, when new difficulties happen we tend to forget about the old difficulties. So I think it's perspective. So acknowledging that there were good things the way it used to be, but they also had challenges. And to kind of try to stop pining for what used to be and what was and just kind of start looking ahead.

And then to get really honest about what is and isn't currently working, so, if we're looking at online learning, or we're looking at all the political stuff that's going on, what is and is not currently working right now, regardless of what happened in the past. And so as you plan for the future just kind of brainstorm creative ways to get the results that you want. If you see that what we're doing right now isn't working given the state of things then how can we tweak that? So this is where your mindset comes.

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And again we tend to fall back on how we used to do things, but how we used to do things no longer applies. But the only way you're going to be able to get to that place where you can start really creatively and strategically thinking is if you've been practicing the mental hygiene because you can't do that unless you're coming from a clean place.

Angela: Absolutely. I love what you said about the past kind of having some closure with it in education at large regardless of what position you are in, in this massive field of education that we have. What we considered to be normal and people saying, "I want things to go back to normal." And even this whole idea of the new normal, I know that term gets used – overused maybe. But really, and I think what people mean by that is okay, saying goodbye. Just having some closure on what was normal in the past and you can use your past to learn from.

But really it's about, okay, here we are in this moment and given all that we have in this moment what do we want to build upon? What do we want to create? And how do we want to move forward from this day on? Versus trying to drag the past with us, it's almost like bring all of our suitcases from the past and bring them with us. It's more of a matter of letting them go and then just let's start fresh.

Kari Ann: Right. And so in terms of letting it go, that sounds easy. It's actually easier said than done. So I tell my clients, and this is what I do, I do what we call, in my practice I call them a thought drop. And in the business world you call them a thought dump or a thought download.

Angela: I call it a brain drain.

Kari Ann: I like that, a brain drain, that's good too, yeah. So, you do a brain drain or a thought drop and you start by examining the thoughts that you

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have about the past, about what used to be normal, you kind of work through that. And you want to actually put this on paper. And I really am old school, I like the whole, you get out your pen and your pad of paper because there's something about the actual writing things down and that connection.

Angela: Yes, because writing is different than typing, it is.

Kari Ann: It absolutely is. And so writing down the thoughts and examining the thoughts that you have about the past, the present and the future. And one of the things that I like to tell people is, you know, here I'm holding up a pen, we're on a podcast. But I'm holding up a pen. If you want to imagine a thought is like an actual object. And you get to pick it off that piece of paper, pick it out of your brain and really examine that thought and question it. How true is this thought? Is it serving me? Is it serving us in the future? Is there another way to think about this?

And so when we talk about thought drops or brain drains, or whatever, it's really about observing and getting curious about all the stuff that's in your mind because it's the thoughts we're having about the past, the present and the future that is driving our actions, that's driving our emotions, that is driving our actions. And yeah, so that's another recommendation in order to help you move from the past and what was, to what is, to what can be.

Angela: Right. And this exercise, I love that you said, "What are you thinking about the past that makes you want to stay attached to it?" What are you thinking about right now where you're at in this school year, this moment? And then what are you thinking about the future? And you'll start to see I'm attaching, like basically what I think will happen for people is the past feels very comfortable, it feels very certain. You feel grounded in it

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because you know it, you understand it. You've already experienced it so it feels very familiar.

The current moment is like okay, I can actually probably ground myself and feel some certainty right here if I take the time, the moment to focus in and do that. But the future, whoa, the future's unknown, the future feels very scary, it feels very uncertain. And what people think is that certainty is an external situation or circumstance outside of us that if we have enough money in the bank then we feel safe. Or if we have these people in our lives then we feel certain. If school goes this particular way and I know what to expect then I'm going to feel better than when I don't.

But the truth is that certainty is only an emotion. And it's an emotion that we create by looking at all of those thoughts about past, present and future. That's a great recommendation.

Kari Ann: Yeah. And something, I was even sharing this with my students last night, our semester just started and I was asking them, "What challenges do you face in online learning?" And consistently I hear two consistent challenges. One of them is that they're not as motivated because they're not in a classroom. And the other one is that because they're at home it doesn't feel like school.

And so one of the things that I told them was that, "Well, the reason why you feel more motivated when you're in a classroom is because you have external motivations. You're relying on the teacher to motivate you. You're relying on your peers to motivate you. And now you have to rely on yourself, it's intrinsic. But relying on yourself is what's going to help you in your future." And just trying to get my students to get that mindset.

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And the other one about being in the house and so we just came up with some creative solutions to how can they almost simulate that feeling of I'm in school now versus I am sitting at home on my couch. And so I suggest you move to a different room. So when you're in Zooming you go to this room. When you're doing homework you go to that room. And I'm sharing this because it took a little bit for them to really kind of think about what the challenges were and how can they overcome them.

And one of the things that I wanted to challenge people is to look at obstacles not as obstacles but as opportunities. It's an opportunity to find a creative way to kind of work around something, a creative way to learn more things about yourself and to make whatever your current policy is or your current way of doing things even better.

Angela: Exactly. No, that is the dream, if we could all look at challenges as the opportunities. But if you just simply stop and ask yourself when you're really struggling with something to stop and say, "Hey, where is the opportunity in this?" Give your brain a chance to even look for it.

Kari Ann: And answer it, yeah.

Angela: Yeah, because a lot of times – of course our brain is wired to look at the problem and focus on the problem, and why it's a problem, and how it's so hard. But we have to create space in our mind and in our actual calendar, physically put it on the calendar. Okay, if I'm going to spend a half an hour thinking about this problem I'm going to spend a half an hour thinking about opportunities and solutions, right?

Kari Ann: I was just going to say that, giving it equal airtime. So, one of the things that I was going to suggest is that to really be aware of the language that you're using when you're communicating to your staff, when you're

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communicating to your faculty. I keep hearing things like, “We’re going to get through this. This is a challenge.” And while that’s true, I’m going to get through this implies that what’s happening is inherently bad. And there’s another way to look at that. It’s not necessarily bad, going all online and making these changes isn’t necessary inherently all bad.

There have actually been some really positive things in my opinion that have come out of this. But if we’re constantly framing things with that language of we’re going to get through it and it’s bad, or it’s a challenge and there’s all these obstacles. You face those obstacles different when you look at them as obstacles versus opportunities.

Angela: Yeah. And when you’re coming to a situation with the energy of let’s get through this, we know it’s really hard, let’s just get through it. It feels like you’re just barely crossing the finish line, you’re dragging yourself through it versus this energetic, like there are positive things that are going on here. And let’s look at the 50/50 of all of this. And when you are feeling challenged, process that emotion but let yourself also kind of play and dance in that space of there’s some good things going on here. It’s not all bad.

Kari Ann: Yeah. And I would look at the questions that you’re asking yourself. I would ask, “What has my team learned? What strengths is my team exhibiting right now? What strengths are my faculty showing and where are they thriving? Who’s doing what really well? Let’s have them share their experiences. How can we capitalize on what’s going on, meaning on more creative ways of doing things, and more interesting ways of doing things, and problem solving?”

And I’m not talking about positive affirmations. People tend to think, she’s just talking about positive affirmations, that’s not it. It’s about opening out to

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an alternative way of thinking and processing information, that allows certainty, creativity, problem solving, and moving forward.

Angela: Yeah. So much of life coaching tools really are just questions. They're just, they're different questions than we typically asked or that we've been trained to ask ourselves. And we also – they're not just questions, we expect an answer. We ask people to answer them. And a lot of times we rhetorically ask ourselves questions but we don't really contemplate the answer, what might the answers to that question be. We just kind of look at like that's an interesting question and then we move on because we don't go deeper into that question.

So I love that what you're sharing where we actually, like what is an actual opportunity here, what are the strengths? How has this made us connect in a different way, in a stronger way? So I want to shift gears on you just a little bit because one of the things we wanted to address is kind of going back to how we use empathy to connect with our staff members, but particularly in your area of work with parents.

And I know that for especially new leaders, they're trying to learn how to navigate connection with new parents, particularly parents who have children who may have special needs, or who struggle academically or in some way, shape or form at school in the typical settings. So you're a professional and a life coach for couples.

So can you share how you intertwine your two careers and why coaching has helped you in your job as a professor but also how you help couples navigate the emotions and the interaction that comes with dealing with the school, and particularly conversations around special education?

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Kari Ann: Yes, okay. So I do, I primarily work with moms of special needs kids and I also work with the couples as well. What typically happens is – and it's interesting, I didn't plan on this when I set out my business plan but it just kind of happened where I started working with the moms. They started finding relief from the overwhelm, the worry, the stress. And then we got into relationship issues and they're like, "Can my husband sit in on this?" I'm like, "Well, sure."

So I kind of had like a mom program and a couple program. And of course I love both of my professions. But I use the life coaching tools obviously in every single aspect of my life including as a professor which I think I have already shared. I give them the tools, I teach them. I teach my students some of the life coaching tools that I have learned and then a lot of people have benefited from. I actually teach communication studies, so all those classes that I teach kind of intertwine naturally with the life coaching practice that I have.

I'm trying to remember. That was a really long question and I'm trying to remember all the different parts of it. So basically in terms of my life coaching I'm able to take the content and the information that I teach my students and I teach it to my clients, especially when we're talking about relationships. And how to maintain a healthy relationship, how to repair a relationship, how to mitigate arguments, how to argue better and resolve issues and things like that and then vice versa with my students with the life coaching tools.

So that's kind of how I intertwine because my two professions really do go hand-in-hand. And then in terms of the special needs, because I started helping moms with special needs kids because of my own experiences as a mom with a kid with special needs. And so I actually get to self-coach a lot in my own life with my daughter. And then I'm trying to share with her and even my typical daughter, some of the tools to help them navigate life

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better with the tools that I have learned and hopefully that they'll apply this to their life.

So that's kind of how the life coaching has kind of been intertwined in my own actual life, and then in my teaching career, and then of course in my practice.

Angela: Yeah. Is there one little extra bonus secret tip that you could give school leaders? What is one thing school leaders can know from you when it comes to approaching a conversation with parents who are really struggling and how to help them feel inclusive, and welcome, and just invited to the conversation when it comes to how to best support their student.

Kari Ann: That, I love that. So I call it compassionate empathy which is where you may not be in the same boat that they are and acknowledging that is first of all really helpful. Going to their parent, going to their families and go, "I want to know what you're going through. Talk to me, what's working well for you? What's not working well?" Especially in terms of kids with special needs there's a lot of frustration that's happening right now with the kids themselves.

But then with the parents trying to parent the special needs child and then come alongside of them and almost co-teach. They're not teaching their kids per se but they have more interaction where they used to be able to go to school face-to-face and their parents had a little bit more of a 'break'. And so it's I think opening up the conversation. It's in all sincerity asking them, "Share with me, what does your day look like? What are the good parts about your day? What are some of the more tiresome parts about your day or the parts that maybe you kind of get overwhelmed?"

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And getting information like that is going to help you as a teacher, as a leader, as a principal, understand what your families are going through and might help you come up with some ways to problem solve, to walk alongside the families and really kind of...

I mean personally my daughter was having an issue with autism in the sense of Google Slides. She was trying to do the homework and she couldn't do the homework and she was so frustrated. And I was frustrated for a few minutes trying to figure it out too and I couldn't figure it out. So I had to email the teachers and just say, "Look, this isn't working for us."

But I was able to reach out and then I found out later that all these other parents were going through the same thing but nobody – everyone was just kind of like, "Well, the teachers have a lot on their plate so we don't want to add to it." But it was creating more stress and more drama in the classroom. And so after I reached out to the teacher and then they felt bad and were like, "Oh my goodness, we didn't even realize this was a problem."

And so a lot of times parents are afraid to sometimes go to the teachers because we're afraid that the teachers are also overwhelmed and dealing with things. So giving the families a space to be able to express what they're going through can really go a long way. And just know that we're all in the same team.

Angela: Right, not the same boat but on the same team.

Kari Ann: Yeah, not the same boat but we're on the same team and that team is our children, and getting them the necessary information for them to go out and be in the world.

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Angela: This is perfect because number one, it's simple, it's simply taking a moment to ask, to be genuinely curious and to seek to understand the experience of that family because every family, there are many families who have children with autism and not every family's experience is the same. So not assuming, not presuming that you know because you know one family that it equates to another family.

So taking that few moments to ask this family, "What is going well for you and what's a struggle? And what's tiresome for you?" One, it's simple, and doable, and easy, it doesn't take a lot of time. It doesn't take a lot of skill set to listen and ask.

But what it does in addition to you understanding with more empathy and compassion for that family, it also just opens that door of opportunity and it provides a safe space for that parent to say, "Hey, you know what? Actually this is what we really need help with." Where they might have not been willing to say it because they don't want to impose or they feel like they'll be, like it'll kind of be pushed to the side or be rejected.

But asking them and really saying, "Let me know. We might not be able to fix it right now but we're going to do our best to work together towards it." It just opens up a safe space to have that conversation.

Kari Ann: It does. And the parent on the other end of it, even if something isn't 'fixed right away' knowing that they have your back in trying to help you with the problem goes a long way. And notice we're not saying to ask a parent, "How are you doing?" Because what people say is, when you say, "How is it going? How are you?" "It's good, it's fine. It's fine, you know, you know."

Angela: Yeah, same old, same old.

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Kari Ann: Exactly. So people don't answer that question the same way they would answer, "Tell me what is going on? What's working for you, what's not working for you?"

Angela: Right. "How are you feeling?"

Kari Ann: Yes, "How are you feeling?" But people, I find that even teachers have a hard time asking that of parents and of, you know, because it feels intrusive. When in reality it's not, it's compassionate and it is kind of demonstrating some type of empathy.

Angela: Absolutely. Kari this has been so beautiful. And I feel like it's just what listeners need to hear. So if they want to learn more about you where can they go to find out more or to contact you?

Kari Ann: Yeah. So the easiest place would be my website is karilifecoaching.com. I think you're going to put it in the show notes.

Angela: Yes, we'll definitely put all the links in the show notes. But it's K.a.r.i?

Kari Ann: Yeah, K.a.r.i. lifecoaching.com or they can also email me if they have questions which is it's Kari Ann K.a.r.i. A.n.n@kerilifecoaching.com. I have all my information on the website. I offer an eight week program to kind of jumpstart people into getting control over their overwhelm, the stress, so hopefully less overwhelm, less stress, less anxiety, more happiness, more joy just from life. And so I do most of my things are done in eight weeks because I want people to experience the results as quickly as possible.

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Angela: Absolutely, right, and two months is a nice little chunk to give it a try because they can always come back for more. If a new situation comes up or a new problem they want to walk through they can call you again, it's not a big deal, yeah.

Kari Ann: That's exactly what happens, yeah.

Angela: Yeah. So my empowered leaders out there, if you know of a family who could really benefit from Kari's services, please feel free to refer them to her. And really part of my mission in having so many people on the podcast over the course of this 2021 calendar year is to let you know as school leaders, number one, you're not alone. I'm here for you. But two, to let you know there are so many resources available for teachers, for support staff, for parents, for parents of children with special needs.

There are actually teen coaches available, there are people who help. There are so many different support systems available that you don't have to just go through the school district or school system to get the support that you need. And the value of this goes far beyond just these eight weeks of getting some support or answering a question.

It really goes into the ripple effect of how you and your spouse navigate conversations about supporting your child. How to support that child when they're struggling, when to let them struggle and to when not let them struggle. When to talk to the school and when not and school leaders I know that you're sitting in IEP meetings, and 504 meetings, or SST team meetings and wondering, my gosh, I don't even know what supports are out there for families. Well, Kari is one of those supports. And I'm so grateful Kari that you were able to spend not one day with me, but two.

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So, listeners you have to hear the truth behind this podcast. Kari and I started this interview a couple of days ago and well, I'm not really sure what happened. I'm speculating that my new operating system crashed my Zoom in the middle of our interview. And we were like, "What is happening right now?" I couldn't speak to her. She couldn't speak to me but Zoom wouldn't close. So it just kept recording, and recording, and recording. But literally Kari, I think it was a half an hour before I was able to figure it out.

Kari Ann: Oh my goodness.

Angela: My computer went bonkers. So we found some time to squeeze in and finish this interview. And I'm so grateful for both of your days and it's been just a pleasure getting to know you better. But I look forward to having you back on the podcast and having more conversations around all of this like empathy, connection, supporting. And really just I love different boats same team.

I'm going to take that to heart and bring that home with my school leaders that we can't know what other people are going through. But we can definitely remind ourselves that we're all on the same team and that is really where the empathy stems from is that thought that we are on the same team. So Kari, we're on the same team, thank you so much.

Kari Ann: Thank you.

Angela: I love the work you're doing. Take good care of yourself and we'll talk soon.

Kari Ann: Sounds good.

Angela: Okay, thanks. Bye.

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Kari Ann: Bye.

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