Do You Coddle or Challenge?

The era of political correctness (PC) made its way into our lives almost unbeknownst to us. All of a sudden, we were watching how we addressed people or made comments about public events, lest we be accused of violating PC. There’s a new era upon us, where those of us who are engaged in teaching, providing care and treatment, or raising young folks are admonished if we create a situation where the learners, patients, or children/adolescents feel as if they have been offended or unjustly criticized. Standards be damned; the new principle is to feel good, above all else. Emotional well-being has become more important than learning how to learn.

The PC movement in the 1980s and 1990s sought to restrict speech, especially hate speech aimed at marginalized groups. Its challenge was to include more diverse perspectives. This new movement is very different. It presumes that students, not only the very young, need to be protected from harsh reality. Parents and others want to assure a safe world. This modern protectiveness has many forms. It may have emerged because childhood has changed dramatically in past generations. When I was a child, growing up after World War II, my parents and our neighbors felt no need to protect us. We were allowed to ride around town on our bicycles and cross bridges. During the summer, we could stay out past dark. We settled our own disputes, either verbally or physically.

This freedom to be out and about, unprotected, became less common in the 1980s, when Baby Boomers and Gen Xers started to worry about societal crimes. Dramatic stories about kidnappings of children came to the public’s awareness. Photographs of missing children began to appear on milk cartons. Children born after 1980, the Millennials, had a new normal—that life is dangerous and adults must protect them from strangers and even each other.

VINDICTIVE PROTECTIVENESS

News about this new protectiveness, especially in academia, has appeared in professional and lay journals and the general press. For instance, the lead story in The Atlantic, “The Coddling of the American Mind” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015), summarizes the principles to which faculty and administrators are now expected to adhere. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) point out that two new terms have arisen rapidly “from obscurity into common campus parlance” (para. 2): (a) microaggressions, which are small words or acts that objectively have no malicious intent, but are nonetheless seen as violent; and (b) trigger warnings, which professors are supposed to issue if, in a course, something might evoke a strong emotional response. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) provide numerous examples in stories offered by professors from their classrooms.

This presumed extraordinary fragility of college students produces efforts to assure safe spaces for them. The authors suggest that the term for this new normal might be “vindictive protectiveness” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015, para. 5). Those who enforce this new phenomenon seem to be oblivious to the fact that, when students graduate, they will be entering worlds that are not safe and may, in fact, be dangerous. They will not have been prepared well for the work ahead of them.

During the 2015 fall semester, the Rutgers University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors hosted an event titled “Silencing Dissent.” One of the present-
ers told about how she had been specifically hired to teach a new course focusing on political activism. When she engaged the students in discussions about how to go beyond talking about activism, and doing it, she was removed from the course with no explanation. Another faculty member’s department chairperson received letters from a nearby community demanding that she be fired because she had made speeches criticizing how students were chosen for charter schools.

Vindictive protectiveness does not prepare students well for their future lives and careers. The lessons in cognitive-behavioral therapy are what they should be learning, so that they can see their own distorted thinking. They need to know and apply how to deal with overgeneralizing, discounting positives, and emotional reasoning. Students should be embracing Socratic methods and valuing faculty who challenge them with questions. Teaching by challenging fosters critical thinking and is the bedrock of good academic methods. Students need to be encouraged to examine and question their beliefs, coming to understand their origins and persuasions. How do students decide who is “wise” or what to believe? Some answers might be uncomfortable or disconcerting. Stretching is necessarily challenging.

**CHALLENGING VERSUS CODDLING**

Psychiatric nurses are teachers and coaches. Rather than coddling patients, they need to challenge them. Imagine how ill-prepared inpatients would be for their outside communities if their nurses protected them and allowed them to be disruptive. Symptoms and problem behaviors need to be addressed by having patients learn how to contain and handle them positively. One of my favorite clinical stories is about Alex (pseudonym), a 60-year-old Russian immigrant, who had a long-term delusion. This delusion involved a beanie on which he had attached small rotating “helicopter” blades. He assured everyone that with the right conditions, he could fly. It was general election time, and because he now had voting privileges in his town, he wanted to vote. I told him that I would arrange a pass and drive him to the voting place, but he could not wear his beanie or talk about flying. He agreed. When we arrived at the place, many of his former neighbors greeted him warmly and asked how he was managing in the hospital. After voting, they invited us for coffee. He loved talking with them in Russian, translating for me. He kept his word about “no flying talk.” Back at the hospital, he left his beanie on his dresser, and never put it on. At his discharge session, he said: “Here’s what I know. I am Alex. Just me. No flying beanie.”

Some of my research students are collecting stories from their classmates and friends about coddling versus challenging. One of the students, who works part time in a day care center, is now aware of how teachers deliver “no” rather than telling toddlers that their behavior is acceptable. Another student, who works as a veterinarian technician, delights in watching how owners are taught to deliver messages to their animals that produce good outcomes. “No” is not necessarily mean.

**STANDARDS VERSUS EMOTIONS**

“No” is many times the initial reaction and beginning of an interchange when a new idea or standard is presented. Allowing emotions to take precedence over thinking shuts down the path to understanding what others have learned, or what communities expect.

Musical scores are standards; improvisations come after musicians learn to play the written notes. Great chefs use standards before they go on to innovate and create new recipes.

Sports also have standards. John Scolinos, a renowned baseball coach, addressed an audience of 4,000 coaches at an American Baseball Coach Association meeting when he was 78 years old (Sperry, 2015). As he entered the stage, the coaches were puzzled by the fact that he was wearing a full-sized, white home plate from a cord around his neck. He made no mention of this prop for the first part of his speech. He then asked how many Little League coaches were in the room, and when they raised their hands, he asked, “Do you know how wide home plate is in Little League?” (Sperry, 2015, para. 14). The answer, 17 inches, was shouted. Then he asked Babe Ruth coaches, high school and college coaches, and minor and major league coaches. The answer was always the same—17 inches.

Scolinos then delivered his main message. If a pitcher can’t throw a strike over that plate, do they make it 18 inches or more? This would allow perhaps some success, and he wouldn’t feel badly. Suppose making it 25 inches still does not succeed in strike throws? Where is the limit to such accommodation?

Of course, coaches do not increase the size of home plate, but they do challenge pitchers to work on their delivery and improve their skills. Thus, they will feel better when they improve their pitching.

**QUESTIONS FOR YOU**

What do you do—coddle or challenge? What will you do—coddle or challenge?

**REFERENCES**


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