

## 20.08.21 Cabin Fever Hour

**Sarah McConnell** [00:00:11] Social distancing has all of us starved for face to face interaction. But some groups are particularly vulnerable to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Like veterans:.

**Roy Bell** [00:00:22] You know, it's even still a struggle now because I can be in the middle of a room full of people, but I feel like I'm the only one there. How do you overcome that?

**Sarah McConnell** [00:00:31] Older people ,too, can struggle to get the social interaction and help they need in isolation.

**Pam Parsons** [00:00:38] They choose not to let people know that they need that extra help because they so fiercely do not want to give up their independence and stay in what they consider to be their own home.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:00:53] From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell and today on the show: social isolation in the age of coronavirus.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:01:06] Roy Bell and Sandra Thomas fought for their country overseas, but their fight didn't end when they left the army. Like so many other veterans, their transition from military to civilian life was tough. They never really felt like they fit in. And even though they've both been retired for several years, they still struggle building relationships and relating to people around.

**Roy Bell** [00:01:31] The legal age for you to join the military is 17. Two days after my 17th birthday, I was raising my right hand swear to support and defend the Constitution of United States of America.

**Sandra Thomas** [00:01:43] So I joined the army. I was 18 years old, had just graduated from high school and just happened to be home from a job that I was working. Sitting on the couch thinking I need to do something with my life if I'm not going to go to college. And be all you can be commercial came on the television. Back then it was just the models saying, like, I don't want to sing it. But it was I'd be all that you can be.

**SFX** [00:02:08] Music: Army Commercial

**Sandra Thomas** [00:02:14] I was like I can do that. Like, I got back and that will carry a weapon and I can. That means, of course, back then I didn't I was going to be going to Iraq and going to war, but it just seemed like something that I could do.

**Roy Bell** [00:02:27] I sacrificed 12 years of my life in service to the military. And during that time, I served three tours in Iraq for a total of thirty nine months.

**Sandra Thomas** [00:02:38] So I served three tours overseas. One was in Kuwait, which was my first tour. I was very young soldier at the time with that one. And then two tours followed a couple years later to Iraq.

**Roy Bell** [00:02:52] My transition from being a soldier to being a civilian was no easy task. I entered into the civilian sector thinking that I was going to be successful. You think that your military service is going to count for something. Well, that kind of, that idea drowned

in the water when I transitioned out. I went from being active duty one day to not having any plan or any goal in life the next.

**Sandra Thomas** [00:03:30] While I was in the army, I was supply and then I became an officer, and you can command this level of respect, you know, with your rank and with the things you do and with the things that you know, and then you get out of the military and there's this, you're just average. You're not anybody special. You're in this space where you feel like you're all alone.

**Roy Bell** [00:03:52] I didn't have any friends. I didn't have any friends. I didn't have anybody to talk to. You build up this team of family and camaraderie while you're in the military. Those people that you serve beside, that's all you got. So you build a bond that's unbreakable or at least you think it is. And as soon as I've separated from the military, as soon as I left the unit, that bond seemed to be no more. No one wanted to stay in contact. No one wanted to return calls. That pushed me further and further away from even trying to have a relationship with people.

**Sandra Thomas** [00:04:34] Since I retired, it's been difficult in terms of friendships and I realized that I, I gravitate towards women who are veterans who have served and, you know, whether they served four years or 30 years. I gravitate towards that mindset because we've all been through something that a large majority will never understand. So there have been times when I'll have someone reach out to me and say, hey, we have a veterans group. It's a couple of us. We meet once or twice a week. Lately it's been on Zoom. But even before that, it wouldn't be on Zoom but we would meet in person to just talk. And I find myself being so happy and so open during those conversations. Very different from a conversation that I would have if one of my neighbors said, hey, you know, some of the neighbors are getting together at the clubhouse. Would you like to join us? I feel so different from those women.

**Roy Bell** [00:05:36] Dealing with a transition during this pandemic. I can only imagine would be extremely difficult. I went through a transition at a difficult time myself. I guess the luxury is at that time, I still had options. I still had things that I could do to take my mind off of things. If I wanted to go to the movies, I could. If I wanted to go out and play some games, I could. If I wanted to go fishing, I could. There are very few options right now for people to have an outlet outside of the four walls at our house. And if this pandemic had been going on during the time of my transition, I really honestly don't know if I would have been able to successfully transition with my life. So trying to find your new you in the midst of a pandemic, I can almost guarantee is life threatening, not because of the disease, but because of the ability to recreate a new life for yourself when you're limited in what you can try to do.

**Sandra Thomas** [00:06:48] To all the veterans that are in a in a state of transition during this pandemic, I would definitely say reach out to all the veterans. You're not alone. And I know it sounds crazy to say have some patience, but it will get better. This, too, shall pass. And veterans are here for you.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:07:17] Roy Bell retired a staff sergeant in the Army. He's currently the national chaplain and co-director of the Virginia chapter at Fairways for Warriors Center. Thomas was an Army Chief Warrant Officer. She's now a logistics management specialist at the Department of Defense.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:07:41] In 2007, Jimmie Fedrick was an infantryman in the throes of a firefight in Iraq. The next thing he remembers is waking up in the hospital. He'd sustained major life threatening injuries. The experience of navigating recovery and all the problems he saw in the health care system sparked his determination to become a social worker. Now, Fedrick is a social work professor at Virginia State University. For the last five years, he's been working veterans to help them overcome issues of homelessness and feelings of isolation. A note to listeners, this interview mentions suicide and self-harm.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:08:22] Jimmie, this has been such a scary period for so many of us. A lot of people feel extra lonely and combined with that loneliness of being isolated. Is the fear of the unknown not knowing how long it's going to last, whether money will hold out. And yet your experience tells you it's even worse for veterans.

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:08:45] Absolutely. COVID is impacting each of us. But for the veteran and service member community, it's extra hard. If I can give an example, you know, I've been I've been going to the V.A. for, you know, for a few years and I've worked there for a few years, and the lobby of the V.A. has always been bustling, just like it's like a mall. You know, it's like an inner city mall. And you'll see veterans sitting all over the place, in the waiting areas, in the rest areas, the smoking areas. And they're just they're just to, you know, co-mingle with each other. However, I went there last week and, you know, it was empty. These older veterans, you know, who normally come there to connect with their peers, they're not there for appointments. They're there just to connect with peers and other veterans and just to be around their community. But it was empty. So we don't know what they're doing, but we know that they're not doing that, that social piece and social connection that we all need.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:09:44] What made you join the army at such a young age? What were you, 18?

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:09:49] Yeah, I was. I was 18, actually signed up at 17, but I couldn't go in until I graduated high school up from North Philadelphia on the inner city is, you know, severe poverty. I lived in homelessness about three or four times with my mother and my four siblings. And then once we got stable and we began to beat the homelessness, we moved into, again, an inner city. As I got older, you know, that street life or that that whole life was really tough. You know, I lost a lot of really close friends and their mothers would tell me you need to do something. And I didn't want to die. You know, I used to, you know, I feared at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen that, you know, I'm going to die here. So the opportunity for the military, arose and I, I jumped on it at some point.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:10:39] You suffered a devastating injury serving a second tour of duty.

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:10:44] Yeah. Yeah. July 29th. I was I was leading a raid on a suspected terrorist hideouts in Baghdad, Iraq. Now, I don't know exactly what happened either. I stepped on an IED or my vehicle which was behind me that drove over an IED in the blast on. Since I was standing in front of it or on, about 40 percent of my body was damaged. Because of that, I was paralyzed or full body paralysis from the neck down. But, yeah, that was that was tough. But to be honest, I would do it all again, you know, I would do it all again, you know.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:11:31] No way.

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:11:34] So when I came out of a coma, you know, I get in contact with my supervisor and I asked everyone to leave the hospital room. And I asked him, you know, I you know, I said, hey, how did I go out? You know, how did I go out? Like, you know, cause I didn't want to go out crying, you know, blood everywhere. So I was like, you know, how did I go out? How did I go? And he said. He said, You did good. I said, what? Tell me what. I kept asking him, am I still a BAMF? Now, please, you know, use your imagination to understand what that means. He said he said, all I kept saying or repeating over and over again was am I still a BAMF.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:12:12] Tough Guy.

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:12:13] So I guess I was I was you know, I said, yes, thank you. You know, and I was so happy there. OK, I didn't go out crying, yelling for mommy. Oh. But you know that that was who. That was a part of it. It wasn't about me, you know. It was more so. What is known as survivor's guilt. At that time, we lost six service members from our group, from our unit. You know, so that was more so the painful piece of it. It was that I left early. We were only there for four months and I was already injured and my guys were still back there.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:12:49] There were some people working with you during your long recovery who really clicked for you, and there were others where it just wasn't working. Right?

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:13:00] So I woke up out of the coma at the Walter Reed Hospital. And when I woke up, I called for help. I couldn't move. You know, I called for help. And a nurse comes in eventually. You know, she's she's angry and she and she starts to berate me. And I still don't know I don't know why I'm here. What happened? I've never been hospitalized for a long period of time, like this. She says you need to get some sleep. Turns around and leaves the room. That right there was my experience for the first few weeks. You know, just individual or the doctors come into my room at four, five, six, seven. You know, talk over you. They'll talk over. You will say, yeah, this is what we think is going on. We need. And then in the moments that I was offered an opportunity to use words and say something, you know, the medical or mental health professionals often told me that, well, you can't do that or that right there is not the best thing for you. You know, you have a traumatic brain injury. You have PTSD. You should probably just get benefits and, you know, work on recovery for the rest of your life. However, I can't live with that. So, you know, as soon as I was discharged, I attempted suicide because I couldn't live with that. Fast forward pass the attempt on suicide. The doctors at the next medical center, which was the McGuire V.A. Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia. These providers, social workers, therapists, rehab specialists, they were amazing. You know, Day one. I get there. And soon as I get there, I say, hey, I don't want this. I don't like when the doctors come into my room every day, you know, or, you know, maybe one or two even coming. And they stopped. No more. I said, hey, is it possible that I can do this? And no matter what the request was the team would say, you know what, let's try it. They included me in my care. They included me as a part of my recovery and leaving there is when I said I want to do what you guys do. And that's when I started, you know, started to chase for a degree, which I didn't have any degrees. So I got my bachelors in social work then immediately after got my master's in social work and I got my doctorate in social work. All with the goal to come right back to the V.A. and do for someone else what all of these providers did for me.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:15:23] I bet you with your experience as someone who had loved the military and also been wounded could especially connect with these people. How would you go about doing that?

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:15:34] I wear a Purple Heart. On the lapel, on my suit and that's to communicate to the veterans. I've been there. I know you know enough. And that did help open some barriers or help build rapport a lot quicker than it normally would be built because they knew that I wore the uniform. And I think that's the most important part. You know, just connecting with them on a personal level. I'll give an example. So there is a, at the Texas V.A. that I work, that there is a camp site. It's just a large wooded area. These are where homeless veterans live. In one of the challenges into getting these veterans into homes is that they don't want outsiders coming into their to their property. So a great way to connect with a veteran. Most veterans you go to, any V.A. hospital in, every veteran that you see in that hospital, young and older, they're more than likely not everyone, but the vast majority want to have some type of memorabilia that says, you know, what they did in the military, who they were enlisted or officer. And what I found is even the homeless individuals who who's been homeless for over 20 years, they still have this one item or these few items. So one of the best ways to connect with them is to use that information that they're already communicating with you, you know. Hey, Sergeant. Hey, sir. Hey, Marine. Hey, soldier. You know, so something as simple as that. You know, calling a veteran by that nomenclature that they are again, they are giving, you already know, via shirt or hat. They appreciate that.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:17:16] Recently you started a new career as a professor at Virginia State University, but you have not stopped advocating for fellow veterans. Tell me about the certificate program you helped create. It's called Homefront Readjustment for the Armed Forces.

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:17:33] Thank you. Thank you. Yes. So I wrote to Virginia State University, to the director and chair of the Social Work Department, specifically because this is where I received care. You know, I wrote a proposal suggesting in pretty much given the full layout of what this course what this program would look like, which is a competency, the certification that anyone can take, you know, rather you're a student or you've already graduated with your degree and your licenses, you can come back to the issue and just get a general understanding, you know, some of the things that the military community experiences, you know, the children, the spouses, the actual servicemen or the veteran. This program was initiated as a part of the social work curriculum maybe two years ago. So now we have students who take minors in social work and leave with the certification. We had our first graduates of this certification this past year.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:18:39] So many years after your service, your injury, your recovery. Do you still yourself experience feelings of disconnect with the civilian population or a disconnect at home or at work or elsewhere like people don't get me, as a veteran?

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:18:59] I don't connect with individuals as much as I believe I could. Now, when I when I'm talking around veterans and, you know, I I'm like a flower of almost 6'4 dark skinned flower, you know, so I open up and spread my wings because, you know, I feel connected and we laugh and joke. You know, for five years I've been practicing social work and I've been working with veterans. And so I'm starting to realize it's not okay. You know, it's not okay to hold it in, but it is okay to let it out. As a husband, I sometimes have to hold in my pain because I don't want to not be a father or a husband. I don't want to lay in bed all day and my wife takes all of the grunt of everything. So I'm getting I have

to get better with that military heartiness best. You know, that that coin term, I've got to understand it is okay to say, hey, honey, I can't do it today. You know, my injuries are crazy or go to see my mental health providers say, hey, I'm just I'm feeling real depressed instead of me going into the garage, closing myself off from the world.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:20:06] Well, I'm astounded by you. Jimmie Fedrick, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

**Jimmie Fedrick** [00:20:13] Thank you very much for having to talk with me. I really appreciate it.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:20:30] Jimmy Frederick is a social work professor at Virginia State University. Coming up next, quarantine in your golden years.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:20:42] The Richmond Health and Wellness Program brings carework students together with low income seniors in Richmond, Virginia. Pam Parsons is the program founder. She's a professor and associate dean for practice and community engagement at Virginia Commonwealth University. She says the isolation brought on by COVID-19 has been especially difficult for the seniors her students work with.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:21:09] What if you've seen and heard some of the people that you've been in touch with. Going through during this shutdown time, that's made it worse?

**Pam Parsons** [00:21:19] I'm hearing that people are feeling more lonely. They're feeling more isolated because they're not able to connect with even individuals in their own families. They don't have masks. They don't have supplies. They don't understand. And they're just kind of stuck in their own apartments. And there really are saying that they're feeling anxious and a little bit fearful and truly missing their connections to other individuals.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:21:53] You know, I know what it is for elderly not to be able to manipulate the social media and the computers and devices the way everyone else can. I mean, if you can't simply veg out on Netflix or your eyes aren't strong enough to read or you can't fix the TV, it's a real limitation.

**Pam Parsons** [00:22:16] Most of the people that we see have a television, but they do not have phone access because of their incomes being so limited. They have very limited minutes on their phone. So they have to be very, very careful about how they choose to use those minutes.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:22:39] What have you seen in them or your colleagues seen in them where you know they're lonely?

**Pam Parsons** [00:22:44] So there are some examples are that people live in these buildings that actually probably should be in a nursing home or in an assisted living because they need that much help and they choose not to let people know that they need that extra help because they so fiercely do not want to give up their independence and stay in what they consider to be their own home. And that's part of our passion of wanting to care for these individuals, is to try to make their home the best quality that it can be and to bring the best support to the individuals that we get to interact with.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:23:31] So what can you do for them when society is not in lockdown at the Richmond Health and Wellness Program? What do you make possible for them, they might not get otherwise?

**Pam Parsons** [00:23:41] We take students that are in health professional programs into the buildings with us. We train almost 100 students per semester and they really, really look forward to having the students there just to talk with them while the students are learning. They're also helping with that social support and social connection piece.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:24:06] How are you connecting with them now when you can't go into the building?

**Pam Parsons** [00:24:09] So we think we were pretty creative. So we figured out how right away to have a phone call with the individual, with those that have the phone access. We are developing a tablet platform so that people that don't have phones or don't have enough access, we're going to be able to give them these tablets and then we'll actually be able to see them so that it won't be a health care visit. It'll be a wellness visit. We're supplying the Wi-Fi to them as well, because in the community right now, if you are in an underserved area, you're on limited income, then it's almost what they call a Wi-Fi desert. So people don't have access to be able to connect to the technologies. So we are going to provide them with that platform and the access.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:25:09] How much harder is it not to have money when you're socially isolated like this, do you think?

**Pam Parsons** [00:25:15] A whole lot. It's probably one of the most important factors that contribute to how you're able to cope, because within the factors of being poor are, again, your access to technology, your education level and your literacy, your ability to have a clean home, your access to food. You don't hear people complaining about that when we talk to them. But if they allow us into their home and allow us to look within their apartment and to open a refrigerator and see one can of Dr. Pepper and that's it. And there is no other food in that entire refrigerator is just heartbreaking.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:26:16] You think we do right as a nation by our elderly, poor in this way?

**Pam Parsons** [00:26:22] I don't think our policies and support that we give to individuals that don't have many alternatives are as rich as they should be. So when I say the word rich, I mean that maybe they need some help with navigation to get food or to set up transportation, to get their clothes washed, to help keep their apartment clean. So we need to figure out pathways of how we can help people live as they age. And using that old saying of age in place. So we're really we're really proud of what our beginning work with the AARP is allowing us to do to help and maybe in a teeny weeny way move the needle on loneliness and social connectedness.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:27:22] Well, Pam Parsons, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

**Pam Parsons** [00:27:26] Yes. And thank you for having me.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:27:36] Pam Parsons is associate dean for Practice and Community Engagement and the Judith B. Collins and Joseph M. Tiffy Distinguished Professor at

Virginia Commonwealth University. She's also founder of the Richmond Health and Wellness Program.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:27:56] This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:28:05] Welcome back to With Good Reason. Face to face, social interaction isn't just good for mental health -- it can actually help physical health, too. James Coan is a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Virginia and his research focuses on the importance of human touch and how it can play a key role in modern medicine. But in the age of COVID-19, Coan has devised a method to replicate some of the benefits of touch through singing.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:28:38] Jim, we've lost so much during the pandemic. And you add to that skin to skin contact. Human touch. Why is human touch so important?

**James Coan** [00:28:50] One of the things about being human is that we're not really adapted to terrestrial environments, like we're not adapted to, you know, tropical environments or, you know, northern latitudes or aquatic environment. We're just everywhere. You know, we've walked on the moon. We've been to the bottom of the ocean. And so when you when you ask about what the human habitat is, what the human ecology is, the answer is really that it's any environment that includes other humans. And if you think for just a moment, it doesn't take very long to realize that the probably the least ambiguous signal that we are not alone is the press of someone else's skin against ours. And this is really tricky. The coronavirus has adapted itself blindly through natural selection to the human ecology. And so the only way to fight it without a vaccine is to deny ourselves to the extent that we can. The environment that our bodies and minds are adapted to exist within.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:30:08] That's really interesting to think that the coronavirus has figured out we need to touch each other and be near. And it's just having a field day with us.

**James Coan** [00:30:17] Yeah, it loves our sociality, our intense need to be around each other. Is the reason it is so successful.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:30:28] Your lab actually did a fascinating study to prove just how important human touch from loved ones is, and it involved the hypothalamus. Basically, what did you learn?

**James Coan** [00:30:42] Well, we wanted to see we've known for decades, if not millennia, that. Having close social relationships corresponded with better well-being and health. What we don't know, what we haven't known is exactly why and how relationships are so good for health. So we wanted to simulate stress in an environment, an experimental environment that would allow us to look at not only how the brain responds to stress, but how the brain responds to stress. When a loved one is present. And so using MRI technology that allowed us to look at the functioning brain, we put people under threat of mild electric shock over repeated trials. And for some of those trials, they were alone in the scanner. And for some of those trials, they were holding the hand of a loved one. And what we found was if that if the relationship to your loved one was very good, then you saw a lot less activity in the hypothalamus itself. This system that is so vitally important to regulating the resources of the body. You not only saw decreased activity in the hypothalamus, but you saw that these people reported better general health overall. So what we found, I

think, for the first time was that there was direct evidence that general health corresponds to your loved one's ability to decrease activity in your hypothalamus under times of stress.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:32:26] I'll never forget I was in my 20s, young reporter visiting this elderly reporter who was suffering heart failure. And he said, the thing I miss the most is people touching me. And I thought, wow, I never forgot that, that the smart, caring, wise fellow understood that what he needed was touch.

**James Coan** [00:32:54] Yeah. About two years ago, I suffered a massive heart attack. It was a widowmaker. And I was lying on the table in the cath lab while they were rushing to put a stent in my heart before I died. And a nurse grabbed my hand. And started stroking my forehead. And I'll never, ever forget that moment, because it sort of collapsed everything about my life into the moments right before I might have actually departed this earth. And I remember feeling so deeply grateful for that touch. My regret is that I never found out who that nurse was.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:33:46] Did that lead you to start teaching a whole course on the importance of holding hands?

**James Coan** [00:33:54] Partly, yes. I just started asking the question, well, why do we hold hands? And as I started putting together all of the reasons that we hold hands, I realized this is at least a new course, if not a book. And it sort of turned into both. I've designed a course called Why We Hold Hands. That's for UVAs new curriculum. And it's been enormously fun for me. And I keep discovering more because one of the things that I ask my students to do is reflect with their own notes and comics and journals that they keep throughout the semester. And they are teaching me so many things about what is ostensibly my domain of expertise.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:34:38] Give me a couple of examples of what you've learned from students.

**James Coan** [00:34:43] I have learned, for example, that holding hands. This is something that should have been obvious, is scary for some people. And not only because touch is very vulnerable, but also because under certain circumstances, underrepresented groups, trends, individuals, gay and lesbian individuals, mixed race couples, the act of holding hands in our prevailing culture can be dangerous. Like literally dangerous. And that this causes all manner of psychological and emotional confusion because it's also that signal that we need and that we use to communicate safety and togetherness.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:35:34] So when you had to switch to all online and you had been teaching this importance of handholding class, you had the idea that maybe instead of handholding, as long as this pandemic lasts, we could substitute another very intimate ritual across the ether. And that is singing that that singing to one another is a powerful medium also.

**James Coan** [00:36:01] Yes. I found that Italians were going to their balconies and singing to each other during such an intense moment of real crisis where people are dying at unprecedented levels all around them was so inspiring because to me, that show of vulnerability, it's our greatest strength that we can call out those bids for connection with each other and be heard. That is just very inspiring to me. It's inspiring enough that I started asking my students in my why we hold hands class to sing with each other. This was met initially with sort of shock and horror, and I understand why it's the shock and

horror that makes it work, right? It's what makes it work. And I started doing this actually before the pandemic. This class of students that up until this moment had been, you know, like most classes of students, cordial, polite, well-behaved, whatever. When I had them sing together afterwards, people were hugging, laughing, clapping hands, taking selfies with each other. We took a class picture just like that, like in an instant. We went from any ordinary class to a class of people who have had a an experience with each other that is rare and intense by virtue of the potential for rejection.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:37:42] What did they sing?

**James Coan** [00:37:44] Well, this is really lovely. I, I was wondering about what to sing and my eight year old daughter at the time, Lulu. She said, I have the perfect song for your class. And I said, well, what is it? She said it's called, Ah, Poor Bird. And it goes like this "ah poor bird take thy flight high above the sorrow of this dark night."

**Sarah McConnell** [00:38:16] Beautiful. Would you play for me the students singing that?

**James Coan** [00:38:21] Yeah. Here's here's a here's a quick example of the student singing together.

**SFX** [00:38:25] MUSIC: Students Singing

**Sarah McConnell** [00:38:34] This is beautiful.

**James Coan** [00:38:45] One of the things that students object to when I ask them to sing to each other is they say, I can't sing. But of course, it's not a question of skill. Someone told me once when I was having this discussion that if all birds sounded exactly the same, we wouldn't have the sound of the forest. I don't want to hear an excellent performance. That's not what this is about. This is about. Them sharing their voice with me and with the class and in enacting, that moment of sharing, receiving the emotional and healthful and psychological benefits of learning to be vulnerable with other people. When I heard the Italians singing with one another, I immediately wanted to be right out on one of those balconies joining the chorus and that's part of what singing does. It invites you in. It's a call. It's it's it's the vocal equivalent of someone reaching their hand out to you

**SFX** [00:40:18] MUSIC: Italians Singing with a dog barking

**Sarah McConnell** [00:40:24] James Coan is a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Virginia. He also hosts the science podcast Circle of Willis.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:40:34] Coming up next, parenting during the pandemic.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:40:45] Kids and their parents are among the groups that seem to be struggling most during quarantine. Danielle Dallaire is a professor of psychology at William and Mary. She's been studying how families are handling COVID-19. She says while most will get by okay, families who normally need extra support are struggling even more right now.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:41:08] Danielle, a few weeks ago, the food blogger Smitten Kitchen wrote a New York Times op ed about parenting during COVID and said, Why aren't we hearing a primal scream from working parents? Do you relate to that? Is it as bad as that for parents at home with kids during COVID?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:41:27] Yeah. I don't even think I had the energy to scream. I think I was just going day by day and. OK, what do I have to do today? And just kind of getting through things.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:41:36] How old are your kids?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:41:37] One just turned 11 in May. And my other one turned 8 and January.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:41:42] So how did it work? What did you and your husband do and how burdensome was it in addition to the joy of seeing your children more often?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:41:50] Well, when we first started, it was it was stressful because I went from being someone who would work in the office everyday to, you know, I'm on call to be the lunch lady, be the teacher, be the gym teacher, be the principal and still do my job. And it was it was it was really stressful. But after, you know, maybe a week or two, we tried to find our own routine that worked for us, sort of a new normal. And and then it got less stressful.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:42:20] You've been studying families and emotional health during non at times when the pandemic hit, you shifted gears to look at the emotional impact of the pandemic on families. What does that research look like?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:42:34] So we launched an online survey, really with no funding. So we just sort of were counting on folks to complete it. We had about one hundred and two people, parents, mostly mothers, complete the survey and tell us about, you know, their stress, depression, anxiety, how they're coping, how able they feel to help their children with their school work, and really how their children were adjusting and their strengths and difficulties. And, you know, we found that parents were stress there. Their top stress was work, their kids education and also their kids screen time, just thinking about how much time they would be, you know, either on computers for school learning. But I suspect it was more on their phones and on their tablets and things like that.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:43:13] What were the top finding in the survey or did anything surprise you or confirm something you already knew?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:43:20] Yeah, yeah. I mean, to that there were there are folks out there, you know, already kind of talking about this from at least in my circle of developmental psychologist. So Heather Prime from your university had a really nice article about, you know, here's some risk that we face now, but there's lots of ways to alleviate stress. And some of the things she noted were, you know, creating routine, something that's like a new normal, talking with kids about how to manage stress and getting physical exercise and getting outside. And we were really surprised. It's not usual, I think, in studies for things to replicate or to sort of come out as nicely as you might hypothesize or expect. And it was you know, we were really pleased to see that, you know, those things really were associated with parents adjustment during that time, their stress, depression and anxiety, as well as their kids adjustment. During that time, the kids who were getting, you know, vigorous physical exercise were having less difficulties adjusting.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:44:15] Are children stressed by the coronavirus mostly, or just that they're anxious to see their friends again?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:44:22] Oh, I think it's both. I think it's both, you know, one of the things that we're hoping to look at is the rate of infection in the area. So there was a study done in in China, in a province in China that was experiencing the coronavirus and they were looking at the rate of infection. How that related to kids adjustment. And in areas where there were higher rates, infection, there were more adjustment issues. But I think that ties directly into friends because as the rates are climbing up. Parents might be less likely to let children have, you know, even limited interactions with other individuals. And that kind of cycles back to what we were talking before about, you know, a child could be frustrated not seeing their friends and they're expressing those frustrations and that carries over into the parent stress. So I think it's all related.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:45:09] As schools are deciding whether they'll open up in the fall, what kinds of things should be taken into account in terms of kids mental and emotional well-being?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:45:18] Yeah. So one of the things that we were interested in looking at were services for kids receiving some type of special educational services through the school. And so we had 41 parents say that, you know, my child was receiving a special educational service and half of them said those services stop due to COVID. But those kids, I think, in their parents could really benefit from that continuation of services. So we found that parents of kids who had been receiving the special services reported that their child were experiencing more difficulties than kids who weren't receiving those services. So I think that would be a really important thing for schools to take in to mind and to target whatever resources that they have towards helping more at risk kids make sure that they're getting the services that they need. And then also for parents, we sort of had this convenient sample of of moms who were willing to take our survey and have Internet access. And they turned out they were, you know, pretty highly educated. Most all had undergraduate degrees and many had master's and doctorate degrees. And they had pretty high socioeconomic status as well in terms of their self reported income. And yet many of them reported not feeling confident in their ability to support their children's educational needs, their self reported confidence and meet helping meet their kids educational needs is actually associated with both third stress, anxiety and depression in their kids difficulties. So I think if schools can provide resources to parents to help boost that confidence, you know, if there's new math that children are learning that maybe 40 year old moms didn't learn, then help give us a primer on how to how to help our middle schoolers learn that new math.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:47:06] What do you want to look at next?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:47:08] Honestly, I'd like to continue with the survey and get the opportunity to expand it to families who are just more diverse and in all kinds of different ways. You know, I think different industries are impacted in different ways. So in Williamsburg, we have a large tourism industry that's going to be hit hard by COVID, not just now, but in the future. And I don't think we felt those effects yet. So I'd like to really try to have the ability to reach a wider, wider participant base to see how our families struggling across the spectrum of educational and income needs.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:47:42] As Congress is putting out another stimulus package, from your research and the people affected by COVID in your research, what would you suggest would be wise?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:47:53] That's a great question. Certainly, I think support, you know, helping support parents to help them, you know, burn the candle on both ends. You know, is there a way to help moms keep working if they want to keep working and help them with their children's educational needs? So is there support somehow for somebody to be that stay at home caregiver to help reduce the risk of exposure by sending children to daycare or other areas that just might increase that risk so they can stay at home, but making sure that somebody has got some security in their job and their health insurance and all those things that you said, that they can provide that support. There's somebody at home provide that support.

[00:48:38] As a parent of two school aged children, are you really paying attention to which school districts are opening in the fall in which are remaining all online?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:48:49] Yes and no. I'm mostly paying attention to my kids' school district, but also the ones surrounding us. I think it's a really tough decision for communities. And there's a lot of parents that are not going to be in a position than I am that you can work from home and and try to do, you know, the home learning and you know, your job at the same time. You know, families who are who are essential employees, they just don't have that opportunity. And on the other hand, the teachers, they've got families that they don't want to risk exposure to as well. So I think each community really has to kind of listen to the members of their community and make the best decision and maybe, you know, think of creative ways to to solve problems, because in the end, I don't think anyone's necessarily going to be happy. Nobody wants this. But we're just trying to do the best that we can with the information we have. So, yeah. Sometimes I think for me, I limited some of the media exposures I've had just because of the stress that it causes me personally. So I'm paying attention to what's happening in my community and communities around. But I don't know if the debate in Denver is as pertinent to the debate in New Kent for me.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:50:01] Can you sort of imagine a solution? Can you picture a classroom setting where children are happy, don't get COVID,. Teachers don't get COVID, but parents are relieved their children are in school?

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:50:18] Sarah, I can picture it. That's a really good dream. I don't know. I mean, I know that every year children pass lice and stomach bugs and the flu and strep around. And, you know, I just I it's hard to believe that there would be a way to contain this.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:50:41] All right. Well, Danielle, thank you for sharing your thoughts on this with me and With Good Reason.

**Danielle Dallaire** [00:50:46] Well, thank you Sarah is really nice talking to you. And I hope you stay well and and stay cool.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:51:00] Danielle Dallaire is a professor of psychology at William and Mary.

**Sarah McConnell** [00:51:06] Support for With Good Reason is provided by the University of Virginia health system, connecting doctors and patients through telemedicine to deliver high quality care throughout Virginia. The U.S. and the World. UVAHealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of her home in Charlottesville,

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