

Matt (host): Welcome back to the Nimble Youth Podcast. I'm your host, Matt Buttermann. Today, we're joined again by author and counselor Martha Metzler, whose book *Sandpaper Moments* inspired one of our most talked about episodes earlier this season. In that conversation, we explored what it means to grow through the gritty parts of parenting, the moments that rub us raw but ultimately smooth us out. Today, we're taking that idea even further.

What does it mean to help our kids develop grit and resilience by allowing them to be uncomfortable? Before we resume our discussion with Martha, we remind you that the content of this podcast is intended for informational purposes only and should not be construed as medical advice. It's important to consult with a qualified healthcare professional for any concerns or questions regarding your child's mental well-being. So Martha, your idea of getting comfortable with being uncomfortable really resonates especially in a world where parents often want to smooth every rough edge out for their kids. And what do you mean when you say that health isn't just about eliminating discomfort?

Martha (guest): Yeah. I think going back to kind of what we had talked about last time is this smooth edges and this sense of well-being, like, and we keep desiring our kids to have grit. Well, that doesn't come without discomfort. And so I always tell people, like, no one's fully fixed on this side of heaven. And so if we're expecting health and wholeness to be an absence of struggle, an absence of anxiety, an absence of any sort of discomfort, well then that's an irrational expectation to have.

And so of course, our kids are always gonna think something's wrong, right? They're experiencing anxiety or experiencing fear, when in reality, we're just really here to shepherd them and help them become comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Matt: Right.

Martha: And so it's when they're experiencing that discomfort, whether it's anxiety or the fear, if we are not fearing it, right? If we are not panicking when they're struggling with it, then they'll start to believe like, okay, what do I have within myself to move through this? Like because this sense of self, this confidence that we desire for our kids and this resilience that we desire for our kids, it doesn't come from this absence of discomfort, it comes from yes, like learning to get comfortable with it, to not panic, but to respond to it with purpose based on how they're authentically made. And so it's okay, what do I need to do to move through it instead of numb it or avoid it or panic?

Matt: Right. And children can pick up on their parents' discomfort with things very easily, more easily than we might think, right?

Martha: And again like we talked about when they see us like sound this alarm when they're struggling or swoop in we're sending them that message that this is something to fear I don't think you can handle this.

Matt: And as you've said before that, parents need to release their expectations of what smoother edges look like in their kids and that they should be the banks of the river not the river itself. Can you explain that metaphor for it?

Martha: Yeah. I I can't take credit for it. I stole it from this great song called Banks, by Need to Breathe. And it's sort of the message of this is, you know, I wanna hold you close, but I don't wanna hold you back. And when I want you to flow, the child is the river, I want you to flow as you are, just as you.

If you're wild and free or if you are the one who wants to kinda map things out, we just need to be the banks to kind of shepherd them, right? Like we wanna be the voice when the wind and the waves get too loud. We can be the voice of, hey, reminding them who they really are. But we don't want to make the way. We don't wanna be the one saying, nope, turn this way, turn that way, or go around this rock.

This is okay. Well, these rapids are coming. Like, this is how you can avoid it. Instead, we can say, okay. What does it look like for you to authentically handle this as you?

And we're here. We're here to shepherd it, we're here to teach you what you have inside of you to manage this. You know I think that meet with a lot of sweet middle and high school kiddos and they have all named it they're like well I have social anxiety so like I can't do this right and some parents will kind of try to take over that of saying like well great I'm gonna manage your social life, I'm gonna set everything up, oh don't worry about that, like I'll like just text them instead of hey, okay, sure you might have some social anxiety. A lot of us do. We can't let it stop us from living and so like let's practice at home, like let's say like we're not gonna text this person, we're gonna call them.

Or even just small ways of practicing this at home too. I tell parents this, if you've ordered a takeout and you pull up to the curb, have your kid go in and say like, hey, I'm here to pick up my order. Can I get this drink? Or whatever, or let them order at the table if you're going out to eat or things like that. Or just even if you have a friend that's an adult that's over, kind of letting them practice having conversations at the table face to face.

And that's all, and then saying, hey, you were really yourself during that conversation. And you kind of provided the boundaries, right? You provided the structure, but it's saying, but how can you authentically do this as you? Because I think when we try to be the river like we're trying to control or manage and steer when really that's it's cheating them from figuring out who they're authentically trying to be and so they're either performing for us then they leave our homes never really knowing what they're made of but also who they really are outside of us steering them.

Matt: Right and they need to learn to develop their own agency in dealing with these well I guess using the river analogy they have to steer the kayak through the rapids right?

Martha: Right.

Matt: And the parents can be there sort of take over but if it gets out of control right? Right. But they need to learn how to chart their own course.

Martha: Right and if we can kind of get curious about who they are and their way through then we can kind of learn what kind of parent do they need, what how so they not only kind of develop more confidence on how they move through things but they also get more confidence on what their voice sounds like and what their direction and their values are and their sense of self because we aren't taking over.

Matt: Right, right and how parents deal with their own anxiety and discomfort is very important too. We are as parents the chief role models and so how do you do that as a parent basically?

Martha: Right. They're gonna learn much more from what we do than what we say.

Matt: Right.

Martha: Right? No matter how great of a TED Talk we have prepared. And my kids will say, Mom, I don't need a TED Talk from you right now. I just kind of need you to listen, but I think for us too modeling what it does is it also shows okay anxiety and discomfort, this is a part of life, is a part of our world. We kind of get to model yes and we're not gonna let it stop us from living.

And I think that starts by yes us modeling it, but also naming it, right? Like I may think of an example in my own kitchen the other day, I was like really just overstimulated and I was feeling anxiety because I was thinking about all the things that needed to get done and I was like my body was giving me signals that it was gonna erupt. And instead of erupting, I have tried to just name it with my kids of like, Hey guys, I am feeling like my body is giving me a lot of signals that I'm kind of anxious about what's ahead and my stomach's kind of twirling right now, my head feels like it's underwater, my ears are even starting to ring. And so I need a little bit of a break because I really don't want to explode. And so I'm gonna go take some deep breaths, I'm gonna walk outside for a sec, and I'll be right back.

And so like they would have never noticed that because I was like underneath the table like white knuckling. But have I learned that anxiety is just gonna be a part of our day in our world, but I don't fear it.

Matt: Yeah.

Martha: And I can respond to it with purpose.

Matt: Right.

Martha: I'm not gonna let it shut me down. And so for me, it also just humanizes it. Right? They're saying like, okay, well, mom doesn't fear it. She's kinda naming it.

And then I kinda try to sneak in some coping skills like, I'm gonna go take some breaths or I'm gonna go take outside. I'm gonna go touch grass, you know, and I think that that shows them like okay, well now she just re-entered back into the scene after moving through her anxiety. And so I think that when they see us as models they can start to pick up on, okay I'm gonna take that coping skill but I'm gonna adapt it to me or at least just know like, this is it's not bigger than we are.

Matt: Right. And that's an important point that that you make a lot is you can't necessarily control anxiety you just have to manage it and understand what it is right. It's not something that you can completely dominate and expunge from your life you know and there's a reason for that because we learn through having these responses. So a big part of parenting anxiety is worrying about how others see us, how our child's struggles might reflect on us as parents. So how do we block out the arena as you say and stay grounded in our own values.

Martha: Yeah I think this is incredibly important for us not just as parents but also for our kids because our lives have sort of never been more on display with the highlight reels of social media. And so we've never had more of an opportunity to receive feedback, but also seek it. And so I think that an image that I had got when I was sitting with a family and both the parents and the teenager on the couch, they were both kind of spiraling about what their sacred family struggle that they were going through, what others would say. And it was equal fear from the parent and the child of, Okay, well, if we handle it this way, then what is this gonna look like for this? Like what is okay, well how is there a way we can figure out how to not let the college admissions know about this or what whatever it may be?

And I kind of shared the visual that I said, what you guys need to do is I want you to picture yourself in an arena right now. And y'all's family and you and your child are right there in the middle. You guys are down there. And it is your battle. This is just your battle.

Y'all have to figure out a way through here. But what's not gonna help is listening to all of the other feedback that's happening in the stands, whether it is perceived or real. You've gotta block it all out because what you need as parents, but also what this precious child who is really struggling needs is to know what? Let's block it all out. What does this look like for us and our unit to move through this and get through this based on what's best for us, not anyone else.

And so I think if we kind of parent from that place then we start actually connecting instead of just performing, right? We start just like looking at what does this authentically mean for us to seek health and peace through this instead of how is this gonna look to everybody else? And it also helps us to like develop these sort of internal boundaries and self talk of what? This is, we are not gonna let shame come in, whether it is internally or whether it is from perceptions, from the perceived audience. We're gonna do it because I will say it till I'm blue in the face.

Shame will be the biggest roadblock to our true transformation and us experiencing true peace. And so if we can kind of create that for our kids, like, let's block all this out that can help be voices of shame, let's figure out our story here. Let's figure out how we can connect and be on the same team just us right here.

Matt: Right. And so when parents are in those fearful moments when there's sort of a visceral reaction there but it's important you say to kind of stop and just ask yourself some practical questions before you react and what are some of those questions that parents should ask themselves in the heat of the moment basically?

Martha: Yes so the ones that I kind of go to to help me respond instead of react is I always start with curiosity. I'm like let's start with curiosity. So okay what is making me as a parent feel scared right now? What's being poked at that hasn't been resolved within myself? Or what am I afraid of right now?

Or what feels too familiar about this situation that's poking at my parts of the story, parts of my story that I haven't resolved yet? And kind of how can I separate my story from my child's? And whose discomfort am I trying to fix here? Mine or my kids? Might my kid be trying to learn through this?

What sandpaper moment right now? What could this be an opportunity for? For them to actually learn about themselves and what they are capable of before I swoop in. And so I think if you can kind of make space for, okay, what does support look like instead of rescuing? What it does is it allows you to respond with wisdom and empowerment for our kids instead of our own agenda.

Matt: Right. And you also say it's a way of supporting without rescuing, right? Providing that support but not taking over and again trying to control things. So you often talk about the importance of parents working through their own stories so they don't merge them with their children's and what do you mean by that?

Martha: Yeah. I think I will anytime parents come to me for, like, a parent consultation or they're sharing what's going on with the kid, I always ask, like, hey. Are you seeing someone too? Because I think the greatest way we can help kid is also just working on our own self and our own story. You know, and again, from that place of curiosity that we had talked about with that other question was making it about them, right?

Of course, okay. So if your kid is coming to you and you can see that they are really upset about something instead of kind of coming to them through your own story of like, here's what we should do, right, you can start with, oh that sounds so hard, can you tell me more about the way that you're feeling about this? Instead of kind of impressing your own emotions or your story onto them or oh that sounds so hard. I kind of felt like that way too but what do you want to do about this? What feels right and authentic to you?

What do you want to do about this? And listen, if they're like, I don't know, then you could be like, okay, that's okay too. There are a lot of places I don't know. So how can we brainstorm together? But when I think that when we kind of work on our own stories, we are protecting ourselves from also parenting out of either, okay, I want to redeem what happened to me or protect them from what happened to

Matt: me. Right.

Martha: Right? And so if I have a wound from my story of feeling left out and then I see my kids struggling with it, if I haven't resolved that, I am tempted to swoop in and say, like, okay. So here's what we're gonna do based on, again, through the lens of my story instead of theirs. When, I mean, in my family, I'm made totally different than my three boys. And so if I'm like, I think you should write a letter like I did in seventh grade, then they would be like, no, that feels so not me.

Right? And so I think that it also helps protect from responding out of fear as well. And so if you've kind of reached this place of resolution from your own story and I think about this incredibly brave mom that was in my office and she had experienced just kind of profound trauma as a child that, made her feel wildly unsafe, with men. And so then of course, with her daughter starting to have sleepovers at other people's houses or kind of being outside of her home, it poked at so much of her trauma that she had not fully resolved. So she bravely came in because her reaction was, Nope, she's got to stay at my house forever.

Will not leave my house. But she bravely came in and we worked on her story. She moved towards healing so that then she could parent out of, Okay, wisdom, like, Hey, I would like to share part of my story and what you need to be aware of. Like she's equipping her child out of what happened to her. She's on the banks of the river.

But she isn't putting her in a bubble. She's not reacting out of fear or parenting out of fear because she has resolved and worked on her own story.

Matt: Right and you're saying, also that in this case that the parents are not using their kids as vehicles for their own redemption. Right. Yeah which is very important and it's a powerful image. So as we conclude our discussion, what's one reminder you'd like parents to hold on to as they try to find their, help their kids build grit and resilience?

Martha: Yeah I think there's really two things about going back to working on your own story. I think what's really important in a phrase that has been really helpful both for myself but also, at work is remembering that we are not broken, we're patterned. And so when we work on our own stories and we recognize patterns within ourselves, then we can actually help our kids not continue the cycle and develop their own redemption, their own healing because we're like, Okay, I'm not gonna carry this pattern on anymore. And it's sort of also just looking through some of the basis of internal family systems therapy. We really have to get in touch with the way

that our own patterns have kind of protected us and so that we can actually allow our kids to find their own way.

But then finally, I think that the, again, if we want our kids to be the amazing, independent, confident adults that we desire for them to be, then we have to start parenting out of curiosity of what their story looks like, release our expectations of the way that they're going to move through things. And it might not look the way that we had originally thought when we were swaddling them, but they will find their own way if we make the space and we are there to equip them, to shepherd them, and guide them, but not control them. And I think that if we can do that from a place of recognizing when they're struggling, yourself, How can this be an opportunity for growth for my kid before I swoop in and what can this opportunity give them? What can this struggle give them if I make space for it? If I take a step back and make space for them to figure their way through?

Matt: Parents often see their child's struggles or their discomfort. They see their child struggling and they see it as their own failure right whereas that's really not the way to think about it. Struggles are how we grow and how we learn, right? Absolutely. And you say your child's discomfort is their classroom, right?

Martha: It really is. And then I think about it, let's not forget that just as it was really important for us to find our voice, it is really important for our kids to find their own outside of us. And again, I'm thinking about these, sometimes I'll sit in the office with the parent and a child, and I'll ask the child a question about how they're feeling, and they'll kind of look over at their parent, kind of waiting for them to answer. And most of the time their parents will answer, oh, well, she feels this way or he feels that way or he does this. And I'll have to kind of say like, hey, let's try it again.

And I was like, what do you say, kiddo? Like, how are you actually feeling about this? And I had one really brave, amazing kid say to his mom. He said, hey. You make a lot of assumptions about what is going on in my heart and my head, and can I tell you what's actually going on?

And it was like, for both the child and the parent, it was wildly healing because the kid started to find his own voice, but also it was this really beautiful connection for the parent to say, Oh, that's how you've been feeling? And so it kind of, they both got to experience this really beautiful healing moment of not only understanding what it means to work together and through connection, but also for them to experience their own voice as a unit.

Matt: Absolutely. Well that's a powerful message and one that we hope our listeners will come away with and thank you so much Martha for again coming back to Nimble Youth and helping us all lean into the grit instead of running from it. And for our listeners who haven't yet read Martha's book it's called Sandpaper Moments We're going to again link it, link to it in the show notes. And we also have some reflection questions that we talked about earlier in the podcast that parents can use the next time these rough edges come up. Please visit our website podcast for the show notes and for these resources that you can access.

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