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It's deeply painful to face what's happening on our planet right now. From forests burning, ocean plastic, species just gone each day, displacement. It's easy to feel totally overwhelmed. Maybe a bit helpless. Powerless. Angry. On fire. Numb. Disconnected. Perhaps all of the above.

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These messy and complicated feelings, they make total sense. I wish that someone had said this to me 30 years ago. I was a college freshman taking environmental studies, which is basically a semester of really bad news about all the ways that humans have profoundly damaged our beautiful earth. And I felt like I had been dropped into a dark tunnel, given no tools to get out and yet expected to carry on with my everyday life as if things were normal. But once you're exposed to that kind of information, things are not normal anymore. And I was anxious, I was terrified, no one was talking about this, and I almost dropped out of school, for real.

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But instead, I signed up for a field study in California, and we were backpacking together as a small group for two months, which I know sounds very intense. And it was, but what I found is that we talked a lot. We talked about how we were feeling about the world, openly and honestly, and no one told me at any point to be more positive or more hopeful. Not once. And surprisingly, I found myself feeling better. I actually felt like I could face these issues that had seemed so insurmountable more head on. And I had this epiphany: What if by understanding ourselves and one another, we could find our way through this crisis in a new and different way? You know, what if psychology actually held a missing key to unlocking action on the greatest challenges facing our planet right now?

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So when I got back from the field study, I focused on clinical psychology, and I researched the relationships between trauma and grief and creativity. And the paradox at the heart of, I think, all of this is how do we stay present with what's really painful, how do we stay connected in the face of what's threatening and overwhelming and scary? And it turns out that psychology knows a lot about these things. Truly, a lot. But I wasn't hearing any of this being referenced in my environmental studies class, or the climate action meetings I started going to, or the international conferences, where everyone is asking: Why aren't we acting faster, and what's it going to take?

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And so this has become my mission of sorts, which is that I take insights from psychology and I translate them into resources and tools to support those working on the frontlines to turn things around. And that means for anyone, by the way. We're all on the frontlines right now. And it's my belief, after years of straddling these worlds between environment and climate and psychology, that this actually is a missing ingredient in our work that can exponentially accelerate our capacities to be creative and resilient and capable and skillful and courageous and all those things that the world is needing from us right now.

04:21

So I'm going to share three concepts with you that I found particularly game-changing and how I make sense of this moment for us as humans. And the first is something called our window of tolerance. So Dr. Dan Siegel has described us all as having a window. How much stress can we tolerate while staying connected and what clinicians would call "integrated." Integrated, where we can actually be in touch with our thoughts and feelings and not just get kind of co-opted. And we all have a threshold. And what happens when we experience stress beyond what we can tolerate? We tend to go into the edges of our window. And on one hand, we might go into a sort of collapse, what's called a chaotic response, which looks like depression, despair, kind of a shutting down. And on the other side of this window is a more rigid response: denial, anger, rigid.

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And so when that happens, we actually lose our capacity to be integrated, resilient, adaptive, all those things that we want to be. And this is totally normal, but it's happening all around the world right now, right? We're all vacillating between these different feelings and emotions.

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And so with something like climate change, with every new scientific report, documentary, connecting the dots between, you know, what we're doing and the impact it's having, it can collectively be pushing us outside of our window of tolerance. And we lose that capacity, right?

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So, over the years, I've interviewed hundreds of people from all backgrounds and political affiliations, from the Midwest US to China, and I talked to people about how are we feeling about what's happening. Not what opinions or beliefs. What are we feeling about what's going on with your local environment, with your water, your soil, the big picture. And what I hear from

people almost across the board, I'm telling you, is a bind. People tell me at some point in the conversation, "I care very deeply about what's happening, I'm incredibly freaked out. I'm scared, I love this land, I love the birds," whatever that is, "But I feel like my actions are insignificant. And I don't know where to start. And I'm also --" I hear between the lines of what people say -- "I'm really scared to change. Really scared of any change, it's so -- I can't even think about it, it's like, unthinkable."

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And this is the second concept, which is something called a double bind. And a double bind is when we feel sort of like, damned if you do, and damned if you don't, and you're just kind of stuck there. It's a very intolerable human experience. And we will do anything we can to get rid of it and just push it away. And so all that care and concern, it's there, it just goes down, it goes underground.

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But what happens is, it looks like people don't care, it looks like apathy. And so a lot of folks who are seeing the urgency of the situation are like, "We've got to motivate you. We've got to get you psyched." And we become cheerleaders for solutions. Or like, "Here's the facts, this is happening, wake up." And these things are actually not inherently bad, because we need solutions and we need to face the facts. But inadvertently, this can backfire and lead to more numbing and inaction, which is very perplexing for a lot of people. It's like, what the heck is going on, right? And so, this is because of this, you know, it's not really touching what's going on underneath.

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So imagine that you go see a therapist, and you've got a double bind. You're feeling really stuck, you know you've got to change and the therapist starts shouting at you and saying, "Don't you see what's happening? If you don't act now, you're going to face terrifying consequences. Don't you care? What's wrong with you? What's it going to take?" Or you see a therapist and you're feeling actually sad and grief. And this therapist says, "You know, don't think about it too much. Here's some simple things you can do. Simple positive things." And sends you on your way.

09:04

So if it were me, I would fire this therapist immediately, because a good therapist practices something called attunement. I love this concept so much. Attunement, right, the word "to tune." And attunement is when we're feeling in sync, when we feel understood and we feel accepted for

exactly where we are. And we feel that, you know, we're in relationship with the world in a way that makes sense, no one's trying to change us or shame us or judge us. Right?

09:42

And attunement takes skill. When the stakes are high, let me tell you, it's very hard to want to attune with anything, when we're facing such urgent threats. But the paradox of the moment we're in is that when we are more in tune in our window of tolerance, we are so much more capable of solving problems, being creative, being adaptive, being flexible, being our brilliant selves, right?

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So what if our climate and environmental work was informed by these concepts, right, of window of tolerance, lot of double binds and attunement? So it can look like a whole lot of things. So I'm asked all the time, "OK, Renee, this sounds awesome for a clinical context, we don't have time for this." And that is absolutely not true. Because we can bring attunement into every aspect of our work on this issue. And it starts with ourselves.

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You actually can't do attunement unless you're in touch with yourself, I'm sorry to break it to you. There's no way around it. It's from the inside out. And so it starts with actually tuning in to "how am I feeling?" And being compassionate. I know it's easy to say but really being compassionate, it's like, these are hard issues. This is a hard moment to be a human being, we're waking up. I'm not a bad person. What's going on, bring curiosity into our own experience, which then allows us to attune socially, that's the next way we can apply this, is attuning, whether it's in small groups or one-on-one, campaigning, strategy, classrooms, movie theaters, parks. Where we can give each other permission to just be who we are, and again, this allows us to move into the higher level functioning. The executive function, the prefrontal cortex, when we feel that our nervous system can calm down and we are understood by the other.

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And the third way is leading with attunement. As leaders and influencers, showing up as human, as real, saying, "You know what? I am really scared. I don't know what all the answers are." Can you imagine leaders saying that? "I don't know. But here we are, and we're all needed. And we're in this together. And we can do this." That's a very different message than just, "We can do this," right. It's like, "Here we are. I'm scared, but this is happening."

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So here's the thing, all of this work exists, we have the tools to create these conditions that can allow us to show up as our brilliant selves. And I know, without doubt, 100 percent, that each one of us has the capacity to meet these challenges with the ingenuity and brilliance and bravery that we as humans have. We just need to cultivate the conditions together. We need each other. To support each other and allow ourselves to really meet this. That's what we need, so ... Let's take a deep breath. Have compassion for ourselves and one another in this moment, time in history, so we collectively process these painful truths, these difficult realities. Let's do this together. The world is ready for us to do this. And we can do this.

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Thank you.

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(Applause)