



**Episode #230**

**Janine Halloran on the Power of Coping Skills to  
Regulate Our Kids' Emotions**

October 14, 2020

Debbie: Hey, Janine, welcome to the podcast.

Janine: Thanks so much for having me, Debbie.

Debbie: I think this conversation is perfect timing, because we're going to be really doing a deep dive into coping skills, which is your area of expertise. It's actually a topic we have probably skirted around. But we've never dedicated an episode to this. I'm really excited to get into all of it with you. But I would love before we do that, I've read your more official bio, but can you take a few minutes and tell us a little bit about your story and how you got into doing this work? And maybe your personal why for doing this work?

Janine: Absolutely. So I'm trained as a licensed mental health counselor, and I've been working with children and families for 20 years. And I actually, you know, it's really interesting how I came to start coping skills for kids. But I'll just start with why I became a therapist. So because I think that's kind of an interesting thing. You know, when I was a teenager, I had a therapist, and they were such an instrumental part of my life, helping me figure out, you know, what strategies I could use, what coping skills, I could use, how to manage different relationships, friendships, family, all that stuff. And I found that relationship to be so rewarding, and so helpful. I remember being in therapy so clearly, one day and saying, I want to do this with my life. That is why I started really dedicating my life to becoming a therapist, you know, I, once I realized what I wanted to do, then I just started doing it. You know, I started looking at schools and colleges and grad school and then sort of started from there. When I was in grad school, something that I realized, as we were talking and going through all the classes they were talking about, everybody needs to use their coping skills, you need to teach your clients coping skills. And they would say the same three coping skills. And I was like, that's not going to work for everybody all. And so let's come up with some different ways of, of strategies for kids that will work. And I worked in schools for a very long time and with kids who were not placed in their typical school settings. So they were having some really big emotions, showing a lot of behaviors and things like that. And you know, sometimes it just didn't work to tell them to take a deep breath. I'll tell you that right now. And so what started happening was, I would start to gather these ideas, I talked to kids about work work for them. I did some reading on what people were saying and what people were researching. I talked to my colleagues about what strategies worked for them. And I just started compiling a list so that I had a place to go, when I was stuck with that kid who I couldn't figure out what to do. And so then I kept looking for this book, I kept looking for this coping skills book, and I could never find it. And finally, my husband just is tired of me saying this all day long. And he says to me, why don't you just write this book, you keep looking for it, it does not exist, you've tried. So just write it. So start writing it. And that's sort of where coping skills for kids started. That's where the coping skills checklist comes in. And it sort of grew organically from there. So it's kind of a weird way to do it. But that's how it works.

Debbie: But I love that I mean, you talk to the experts, the kids themselves and what's working and then you created what needed to exist. So I love that, and I also love talking with people who kind of identified when they were teens or kids what they wanted to do, and then are still doing it and loving doing it. So that's really cool.

Janine: Yeah, no, I absolutely love my job. People are like, you are so weird. And like I just, I love it. I love working with kids. Give me a snarky teenager any day. I love that.

Debbie: I mean, I hear it in your voice, I can tell the joy and energy that you bring to this. So you're the kind of person I like having on this show. So I would love to just start by defining what a coping skill is because I will be honest, I probably started therapy in my mid 20s. I did our REBT -- I don't remember coping language coming up in it. And it wasn't until my son was maybe eight that a coach, an executive functioning coach he was working with talked about a coping routine and this was like a newsflash to me. So can you define what exactly a coping skill is?

Janine: Yeah, absolutely. So the way I think of coping skills, is there a way to deal with your feelings and emotions and behaviors. And you can sort of think about them in two sort of ways you can think about, you have healthy coping skills on one side and unhealthy coping skills on another. So I think about, you know, being able to figure out a way to take a deep breath, like doing belly breathing or being able to do a grounding exercise or being able to express your anger in a safe way, like maybe doing some jumping jacks or jumping on a trampoline all of those things. fall into the healthy category of coping skills. You know, when I think about the unhealthy ones I think about when kids are having really big emotions, and they can't figure out how to do it safely. So then they turn to unsafe behavior. So they're throwing, they're hitting, they're kicking their strategies, they're trying to cope in that moment, right? Like they're having big emotions, they're having big feelings, but they don't know how to channel it. And they're just, they're just overwhelmed. So I like to think about trying to help kids figure out the healthy ways to channel their emotions. And I always say to kids, I say this to adults, and I say to myself, all feelings are okay, it is okay for you to be furious. What you do with that fury matters. You have to figure out how to safely and in a healthy way express it, but it's okay to feel any feeling. It's okay to be sad. It's okay to be anxious. But what do you do with that when that happens? And how can you show it in a safe and healthy way?

Debbie: I think that's such an important distinction. I am recalling a conversation with the same therapist who had had a kind of a tricky session with my son again, I think he was eight or nine at the time. And maybe I was describing something that happened in a big explosion. And she was the one who said to me, Well, actually, that was his coping like he was processing it. And I was like, Oh my gosh, because I equated anger as bad. And when she was like, actually, his response was 100% appropriate for that particular situation. And so I think it's really interesting to think about healthy versus unproductive or unhelpful coping

mechanism. So let's talk then about all kids, probably all humans, right, we all already have coping skills that we use are coping mechanisms, how do we, you know, suss out the ones that are working, and then the ones we want to set aside because they're not productive?

Janine: Well, it's really interesting, I like to divide up coping skills because as a counselor, I have been given those lists of like, 101 ways to deal with stress. And that can be really overwhelming for a child, like super over overwhelming for me as the adult who's looking at the lesson, like I don't know where to begin with this. So I totally understand that overwhelm of like, what works, what doesn't work? Where do I begin? So I actually, this is so organic, the way that this started happening for me, I was I brought one of those, like a longer list of coping skills to a group with kids. And I had this little this, I can't, Oh, my gosh, she's so funny. She had this little attitude, she would always like, bring it right back at me. She said to me, this list is too long. I don't know where to begin. I have no idea what I'm doing with this, you need to help me. And I was like, Okay, fair, that is fair. There's something about you know, you, you listen to your clients, you listen to what they have to say. And I heard her in that moment, like, this is really overwhelming for me. And it's not helpful. So how do you help me with my emotions, if I'm feeling overwhelmed right now. So right then and there in the group, we started dividing up the coping skills. So it was easier to figure out which one works for you. So over time, it's been refined to five different strategies. So I have relaxation strategies, and those are strategies that are deep breathing, mindfulness, grounding techniques, using your imagination, those would fall into relaxation, that coping style, another coping style is distraction. So being able to use play, being able to use fun activities to help distract you, not to avoid not to suppress not to deny feelings, but sometimes you need a break, your brain needs a break, and that is going to be helpful to you. I also love using movement. So especially for those kids who have a lot of big angry feelings, sometimes the best thing they can do is figure out a movement, some sort of activity they can do with their body to express that anger a little bit more safely. So while push ups, jumping jacks, squeezing something. And then we have those kids who are on the sensory processing spectrum, you know, how sensitive they are and they really respond to maybe weighted items, maybe spinning, maybe being in a small enclosed space, maybe having something tight to their body. Those are the kids who would respond better to those sensory sort of things. And then I also think processing is really important. We need to talk about our emotions, we need to identify our stressors, we need to identify where we feel things in our body, we need to identify the things we can and can't control. All of these coping skills are, you know, things that could be helpful for you, but it depends on where you are at depends on what feeling you're experiencing. And it depends on the type of person that you are. So you know, I've taught my son For example, He is totally like a movement and sensory guy. Those are his coping skills when he would literally run around our house like outside of our house, he runs around when he gets too big of emotion, like he just has to get it out my daughter totally into relaxation. So she loves to be able to do, you know, using her imagination, thinking about things that she loves thinking about people, she cares about drawing pictures of her favorite place. So kids tend to fall into one or two of the categories, they tend to favor one or two, not to say that they

shouldn't use the other strategies, but trying to help them figure out what strategies they really gravitate towards most is really helpful.

Debbie: How do you do that exactly? You know, what is that process to figure out... I mean, probably observation with some kids, it's more evident, what might work for them. But what does that look like when you're working with a child?

Janine: And so for me, I actually use something that's a free resource on my website called The Coping Skills Checklist. So for all my clients, and I've even done it for my own children, we'll just go through the checklist. So it has all the categories separated out. And just by going through and just saying, Let's check off the ones that work for you, check off the ones that you like, cross off the ones that you know, don't work for you, and then circle the ones you want to try. And I've worked with kids a lot. So I've, I've had those kids who like cross out everything. And so, you know, in order to prevent that from happening, I say, you know, you can't cross out things you haven't tried yet. You can only cross off things you've tried and you know, don't work. So by just looking at that list, it gives you an idea of what sort of things they tend to gravitate towards what sort of things that they like, what sort of strategies are already working for them. And that alone can be really powerful for kids to know, Oh, my gosh, my, when I read that can be a coping skill for me. Absolutely. That is a fantastic coping skill. Please use that the things that they love to do can be things that can help them regulate their emotions.

Debbie: I love that you said that. When I used to send my son to camps when he was little, you know, day camps over the summer, I would always tell a counselor, he's got two books in his backpack. If he gets dysregulated, just give him a book and set them down somewhere and he'll be fine. I never equated that as coping. So I was like, that's how he emotionally regulates. But really, that was a coping mechanism so I don't know why I didn't make that connection.

Janine: You know what? I think a lot of people don't. And I can't even tell you how many times we're just doing the coping skills checklist. People are like, Oh, my gosh, I have a lot of different strategies I can use. I'm like, yeah, you really do. Like you're a brilliant person, you just needed to have a little direction. And so sometimes they'd be like, I'm good now. And that was enough. That's all I cared about, you know, therapy is one of those jobs where you're like trying to work yourself out of a job, which I appreciate.

Debbie: So and then this idea of a coping routine, because as I said, this is something that came up with this therapist that my son was working with, and she I don't know how she designed it, I feel like she told him what to do. And it was these four things, you know, like, rub your hands on your lap, and then squeeze your face. And I don't remember, there were four things and I was told as a parent, you know, when your child is getting dysregulated and about to explode, or in, you know, in the orange or the yellow zone that they should do the coping routine, is that different? Or is it really just putting together different coping skills?

Janine: That's really just putting together different coping skills. So you could make a coping routine out of, you know, the, the different coping styles that I just mentioned. But you can do it with only just sensory or only relaxation strategies, whatever works for the kid. And I think that's the piece that I find so powerful is making sure that kids have ownership of it, that they have control of it, because it's their body, it's their emotion, it's their thoughts. So we need to make sure that we're helping them figure out the strategies that will work for them. It's really hard. When an adult is telling you Well, you need to take deep breaths, and you need to take them like this. Well, what if that doesn't work? And to be open to that to be open to like, Well, what does what works for this child, what works for that child, and offering lots of different strategies so they can figure out what works for them or make their own? You know what I mean? I love creativity. I love when kids are like, well, that one didn't work for me. But it made me think of this other thing. That was fantastic. And it was awesome. And then I want them to tell me Well, what was it because I want to know what it is too so I can tell other people if they get stuck.

Debbie: So talk about what this looks like in practice. I'm thinking of little kids. I know that it seemed to me one of the mysteries of the world that we have these little kids struggle with emotional regulation. So many of us learn about the zones, green zone, the red zone and the job and I used to give teachers you know, these charts and things like the job is To help our kids start to catch before they hit the red zone. So I just I'm curious to know, when you do coping skills or work with kids on developing their own. I guess I want to know how it all works in that emotional regulation cycle.

Janine: Yeah, absolutely. So one of the things in the processing, coping style is to start identifying it, and you're identifying your feelings in your body. So figuring out when you're starting to feel angry when you're starting to feel anxious, and helping them make those connections. So when I start to I have a client who she feels anxiety and the way she describes it is like she gets a stinging. It's like the nerve endings are pinging off in our hands and our legs. And so she feels it. She says I and she felt it since she was little. And so we talked a lot about when you start to feel that Sting, come up, your arms come up, your hands come up your legs, that's when we need to intervene and do something when you're starting to feel that what are the strategies you can use? Let's talk about doing some 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 grounding. Let's talk about doing some 4, 7, 8 breathing, let's talk about doing some different strategies. And then also making a plan for recognizing what are the things that caused me sting? What are the things that caused me anxiety? Is it giving speeches in front of the class? Heck, yes, it is. Is it having to do with conflicts with friends? Yes, that causes anxiety as well. Let's talk about when you are experiencing that, what's your plan? What are you going to do in that situation? So there's a lot of work that goes into talking about it before it happens. And then after an incident occurs to be able to decompress and sort of unpack, okay, well, what do you think led up to that? And how do you think we could handle it differently? How do you think you handled it this time? What would you change about the next time, you know, trying to really do a lot of unpacking, before and after. So there's a lot of actually, it takes a lot of time. And that's the thing, I feel like, sometimes people want me to have a magic wand and

like, wave it over the kid and make sure that like, they're fixed. Now, you know, after meeting with me for six times, or whatever, I'm like, that's not how it works. Because what's going to make them anxious or make them scared or make them angry is going to change over time. And we need to figure it out, what I want to do is help them figure out the strategies that will work for them and think through, okay, if this strategy doesn't work, what can I do instead, and be okay with that, like, be okay with that, it's not going to be 100% all the time, because it's not no human is perfect.

Debbie: No, and I feel like half of the shows I'm recording right now are for parents to be doing this work on themselves. Because, you know, in this time of the COVID pandemic, and we are all just tapped out and we need coping skills and routines and, and so I do find it so interesting that this is work, many of us as parents are really early on, and yet there is an expectation, or maybe it's just a hope, above all hopes that our that our kids are going to get it in a couple of weeks, because many of us are dealing with pretty intense, you know, behavior and emotional dysregulation. And we do want quick fixes, right?

Janine: Oh, of course. And that's the thing, like I've lived this, I have kids, I've seen the big behaviors, you know, and because of that, I also get that piece of like I want it fixed now, of course, you want them to be better. You don't want them to be suffering, you don't want them to be and you can tell something is wrong, and you want to help them. But it will take time to be able to step back and be like, Okay, I need to pull in the my team I need to pull in people who can help me who can support me, where is my community, but then also giving grace to ourselves with the fact that it's not gonna go well, all the time. Celebrating when something is moving even a baby step in the right direction. I remember when my son was like four years old, and I'd be like, the tantrum or the episode, the meltdown lasted 45 minutes, instead of that, and you know what, that was the wind in my back then.

Debbie: Totally, I could relate to that. And the thing about this, too, is that it may seem like it's slow work, but you know, talking about what we're experiencing as adults now, figuring this stuff out. I get so excited when I think about our kids doing this work now and how evolved they're going to be as grownups, like they're gonna move into adulthood with this skill set that we didn't have in our 20s for sure. And that's really exciting to me.

Janine: Yes, it is exciting. I am excited about it, too. It makes me so excited to think about the fact that social and emotional learning is such a huge part of school now. And it's something that people are talking about and people are recognizing. I mean, even for my own district. It was the second thing after health and safety. So that they want to really promote and talk about and in school and I was like, Oh my goodness, as a therapist, I was like, Yes, let's do this. And that it's so powerful. Because think about how they're going to interact with one another. Think about how they're going to be in relationships, how they're going to be in friendships, they are very aware. And oh my gosh, light years ahead of where I was at their age.

Debbie: Sure. 100%. So I'd love to know about different ages. Because first of all, you've got a book, Coping Skills for Kids book, you also have a teens workbook, and both are fantastic. And you listeners, I'll have links in the show notes, you should definitely check them out. They're just super practical, super useful. And I'm wondering, you know, are their coping skills that are more 'go to' for different ages? Do they change over time? What actually works for kids?

Janine: Yeah, absolutely. So you know, if I think about my own kids and my own clients, I've seen tremendous change, especially that like, when you start with an elementary school, and then they get to like high school, they are so different. Think about even beginning middle school and ending middle school, kids are so different. And so what how they cope changes over time. So for little kids, I think one of the most important things to do is actually just start talking about emotions, talking about feelings, reading books, about feelings, talking about the feelings that characters might have, and TV shows, and just really making it part of the natural, everyday life, that you're just talking about emotions, and talking about how things impact other people, and then being able to just teach them some simple, simple strategies. So for little kids, I love to teach them to breathe by laying down and putting a stuffed animal on their belly, and just having them move the stuffed animal up and down, just moving their belly out and moving their belly back in. And they love it too, because they get to play with their stuffed animal. And so just starting really simple with little kids, they understand sad, mad glad they get those three, when they're that little. And I've used zones of regulation, when my son was like three or four, I was using zones of regulation with him because he got it. It's like super visual, you know what I mean? And so he totally was like, I'm green, or I'm red. So it was really, it's fun to see them like sort of polenta, those things. For the elementary school kids, what I think is really neat is to start making sure that they have the time to play and relax, because play is a natural stress reliever for kids. And so giving them an opportunity to be creative, to de-stress in that way, I think is phenomenal. And to make sure that they have a trusted adult that they can talk to being able to talk to somebody is huge. And you know somebody that they feel like they can trust. Even doing a journal back and forth with an A with a parent is really kind of cool. Like you can secretly send the journal back and forth between you and a child and see what they do. I also like using drawing, using coloring, and even doing that and talking about feelings and talking about thoughts. And being able to explore that with elementary school kids is really cool. And then with high schoolers and middle schoolers, they're kind of interesting creatures, right? Like, what I find with them is that they are still willing to do the things that littler kids do. But they just want to make sure that they're not being so like, you're not going to be exposed. They want to be vulnerable with you, if you are like in a therapy relationship or with a parent. They want to be able to trust that it's private, but they're willing to do stuff like I've worked with kids. And we've tried mindfulness. And we've tried, you know, eating a chocolate bar in a mindful way. We've tried taking a mindful walk. I try a lot of deep breathing exercises with them. And the thing that helps them do it is that I do it with them. And I'm like, this looks silly doesn't that oh, well, here we go. I'm gonna do it first, and you try it with me. And because I'm willing to be vulnerable, they're willing to be vulnerable.

- Debbie: I think I'm gonna try them mindfully eating a candy bar thing with my child because I like that idea. Sounds like a win win for everybody.
- Janine: I have to tell you, it was like one of the best days that they're like, you want me to eat a chocolate bar? like yeah, I have one, two, here we go.
- Debbie: I imagine too, this is also us modeling. Like, I think right now, I feel like at this point, I have good coping skills. And for me, it's movement. I get out for walks and runs multiple times a day, sometimes depending on what's happening, but I also try to talk out loud about it. Like I've had a really stressful day I need to get out and move my body. So are there ways that we as parents can model that This behavior effectively for our kids as well.
- Janine: I think exactly what you do exactly where you're just saying is what we should be doing, we should be expressing, like, I know that I need to move my body because it helps me regulate, I will say that out loud to my kids, like I need, I'm feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. I don't have to tell them all the details about why that's happening. But I will say like, I'm gonna go for a walk, anybody want to come for a walk with me, you know, being able to show them and show them like, adults have a range of emotions, and we are trying to manage it and work through it. And it's okay for you to do the same thing. It's okay for kids to have a bad day, just like it's okay for adults to have a bad day. And to give each other grace around. That is huge. You know, I think it's really important that adults do figure out those ways of the ways that they're coping. Sometimes I think, when we talk about self care for adults, I really think we're just talking about coping skills for adults. Yeah. Yeah. And so what are the strategies that you use? I love movement and I love Zumba. I try to go to Zumba anytime I can. It's been a little bit tricky with COVID. But my Zumbo teacher is still doing Zumba remotely.
- Debbie: Zoom Zumba, right?
- Janine: Yeah, Zoom Zumba. But I'm like, trying to find faces in my house to zoom, but not like not going to anything. But that's fine, because that's what I need. I play video games I read. Those are things that I know I need to do on a regular basis in order for me to reset and recharge and be refilled in order for me to do the work that I'm doing. Because it's cold. It is hard, man.
- Debbie: That is true. Yes. So what about kids who are resistant? And you know, I imagine you must come across clients or talk to parents whose kids have zero interest in figuring this stuff out and are resistant to even exploring coping skills that might support them?
- Janine: Oh, yeah, absolutely. run into it all the time. What I would say is the way that I start to talk with kids, if they don't want to talk to me, in general about coping skills, I just asked them what they like, because that gives me clues as to what can help them. And I tend to be a person who actually loves a lot of kidlit. So I read all the books that my daughters read, my daughter reads, and my son reads. So I can talk about Harry Potter, I can talk about the School for Good and Evil, I can talk about the land of stories, you know, so I, I have these conversations with

kids where they tell me and I can see what lights them up. And then eventually we can get around to a place where they are more trusting in the relationship. And I can say oh, gosh, you know, I wonder if this might help when you're having a hard day, to come to it in a different way to focus on the things that they love. Because kids will tell you, they'll talk to you for days about things that they love. And like it could be Minecraft I don't care, like talk to me about Mario Party, I can do it. But starting with the things that they love, and just starting to have a dialogue and conversation around that. Also, sometimes for kids, it feels too, too close for them to talk about themselves. So I'll say, Well, what have you noticed with other kids? Like what makes other kids angry? What makes other kids frustrated? And how do they handle it? And what are your thoughts on that? So like deep personalizing it, so it's not really about them. And the moment it's about Oh, what did you notice from your classmate?

Debbie: So true. So I would love if you could before we kind of wrap up, just tell us a little bit more about your Coping Skills for Kids workbook and the teen workbook. You shared why you've written them, but what they could expect in those books?

Janine: Yeah, absolutely. So in the Coping Skills for Kids Workbook, I have divided it. And there's four sections. So movement and sensory are combined. And really what it is, is just a tiny little snippet, to explain a plethora of coping skills in there. And there are some worksheets that can help. And there's a coping skills checklist in there and a bunch of resources in the back. So just giving you an idea, a little bit more explanation of what the strategies are, what the coping skills are, so that you can try and see if it works for your kids, see if it works for your client. And I basically did the same thing for the teens, I made it a little bit more concise. It's the movement and sensory are still combined into one. So there's four different styles in that book as well. But really, for a teen audience, I really tried to be as open and honest and vulnerable with them as possible in that book so that they would feel like oh gosh, I can do this. This is okay. So I tried to express that as much as I could, but really talking about channeling big emotions into positive energy, using journaling, using music and movement and art and creativity. Being a poet you know, being doing all sorts of things. Whatever brings you joy To be able to use that and figure out how you can use that to cope with all of the big emotions that you're having, which is typical and expected as a teenager.

Debbie: Yeah, and I find it so interesting right now to just what I'm observing in my own home and what I'm hearing from other parents, the things that kids are gravitating towards, and some really aren't going creative and, you know, going back into art, some are regressing, but they're regressing with things that really bring them a lot of comfort and music or whatever, those those areas are a lot of gaming, of course, but they are kind of naturally moving back into those places, right?

Janine: Yeah, absolutely. Because it's a place of comfort. I mean, how many people watch the same show over and over and over again, or go back to something that they enjoyed when they were little? That's comfort. That brings you safety in a world where you don't really have as much control as you thought you did?

Debbie: Exactly. So before we say goodbye, any last, I don't know words of you've already shared so many words of wisdom. But any last thoughts are for a parent who's listening to this podcast? And who's kind of sparked and thinking, why really want to, I want to get on this and support my child in this area of coping skills, where's one place they can start?

Janine: You know, I would say honestly, I love the idea of just starting to have a conversation with kids about the things that they love, and sharing the things that you love really starting to as a family, like, what are the things that we enjoy doing together? What are the things we enjoy doing by ourselves, and using that as a way to recognize that resting and recharging is also a way of managing your emotions, and being able to recognize that and one more thing, just give everybody grace, including yourself, because this is hard. This is challenging. And it's challenging for teachers, it's challenging for educators, it's challenging for parents, and it's challenging for our kids. So we need to just give each other grace, it's okay to have a bad day. It's okay to do nothing all day like it's gonna happen. Because and allow yourself that space in time, because you probably need it. And then you can start again the next day, every day is new.

Debbie: Every day is a fresh start. I love that. And where can listeners learn more about your work and connect with you?

Janine: They can go to [coping.skillsforkids.com](http://coping.skillsforkids.com) and that's where they'll see all sorts of information about me and the resources that are available as well.

Debbie: Janine, thank you so much. I feel like I have some new skills and excited to have some deep conversations with my kiddo. So thank you so much for sharing all this today.

Janine: Oh, thank you so much for having me. I was really excited.

## RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Janine's website](#)
- [\*Coping Skills for Kids Workbook\*](#)
- [\*Coping Skills for Teens Workbook\*](#)
- [Coping Skills for Kids on Instagram](#)
- [Calm & Connected Podcast](#)