One part of creating a safe space is learning how to nurture emotional care and wellbeing for ourselves and for those we love. One way to think about this is in terms of nutrition. Just like our bodies require good, nutritious foods to remain healthy, our minds require a consistent "diet" of good emotions, experiences, and feelings to remain healthy.

When we feel appreciated and valued, we experience security and openness in our relationships. This is often called emotional safety, and we're going to explore how to cultivate a sense of emotional safety in ourselves and in others today.

To start, try this visualization. Think about a time when you felt deeply known, loved, and accepted by someone. Spend a little while trying to recall every detail of that moment. How did you feel? What did that person say that made you feel so known? How did you respond? Spend a few moments sitting with that mental image and the feelings it awakens in you. When you're finished, flip to the next page of this lesson.
EXPLORING EMOTIONAL SAFETY

What is Emotional Safety?
Emotional safety is a relational environment where people feel appreciated, valued, and worthwhile, even in the face of great differences. Perhaps it’s a family where each person is fair, consistent, and kind with each other. Perhaps it’s a friend-group where each person feels like they can share their vulnerable and sensitive feelings without fear of being mocked, blamed, or judged. Perhaps it’s a place of worship where differences of opinion can be shared and accepted, where people don’t feel that they have to change themselves in order to be welcomed, loved, and cared for.

Signs of an Emotionally Unsafe Environment
Just like physical health requires that we identify foods that are nutritious and foods that are toxic, emotional health and safety requires that we understand toxic behaviors in our relationships. Here are just a few examples: judgment, blame, name-calling, physical violence, and passive aggressive statements. Often, these behaviors stem from a person’s inability to accept the differences of someone else, which in turn creates a sense of insecurity in the relationship (the complete opposite of safety).

Working On Ourselves
The first question we must ask ourselves when we begin to think about nurturing emotional safety is, “How can I build up behaviors and attitudes that make others feel safe?” Emotional safety is a group effort, but we must start with ourselves. We can’t start by trying to change others. In fact, recognizing that we shouldn’t try to change other people is key to fostering emotional safety. Instead of trying to change other people, we must commit ourselves to listening and trying to understand others, even when we disagree. When we do this, we find that openness and honesty flourish in our relationships.
EMOTIONAL SAFETY IS KEY TO OUR MENTAL HEALTH

(Click the image to watch a short video)
Question 1
How have you seen emotional safety modeled in your life? Perhaps a teacher, friend, or guardian has shown you deep acceptance. What behaviors do they embody that you can try to emulate? How could you begin to show the same kind of acceptance among your friends and family?

Question 2
One way that we can cultivate emotional safety is by being honest about where we have failed to make others feel accepted. Go back to the list of toxic behaviors on page 3 of this lesson. Have you ever lived out any of these toxic behaviors towards others? How do you think your behavior made the other person feel? How could you have handled the situation differently to show acceptance and love to the other person?

Activity
Free association time! Break out a journal or sketchpad or canvas—however you prefer to express your creativity and curiosity! The point of this exercise is to allow your mind to explore with absolute freedom—no judgment, no boundaries. Now, set a timer for 10 minutes and write or draw or paint whatever comes into your mind when you think of the phrase “emotional safety.” Again, there are no rules here. Just express yourself in whatever way you are most comfortable.
IS EVERYTHING CLEAR?

Take a moment to jot down any questions you may have. Keep these in a notebook to ask during our next Westwood Youth Collective virtual gathering, or feel free to email Jake your questions at the address below!

JPUTICH@WESTWOODPRES.ORG
ENGAGING WITH SCRIPTURE

Let’s pivot our attention to the ancient wisdom of scripture. In this passage, Paul describes how the church community—those who claim to follow Jesus—will look when bonded together in the power of the Spirit. Paul uses the metaphor of a body with its many parts all functioning together to illustrate the kind of unity in diversity that the people of God should work toward.

"The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don’t, the parts we see and the parts we don’t. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance. You are Christ’s body—that’s who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your ‘part’ mean anything."

Paul the Apostle, 1 Corinthians 12: 25-27
Take some time to contemplate these words from Paul's letter to the ancient church of Corinth. Go for a walk, listen to some music that helps you think, light a candle and meditate, or spend some time in prayer. Take note of any thoughts or feelings that arise in you as you think about this passage of scripture. Be honest with your feelings. Take note of your questions if anything is unclear. There is no way to "fail" this exercise. There are no wrong answers or feelings or thoughts. The important thing is that you're honest.
Question 1
Why do you think it's important for a church community to embody welcome and inclusivity? How does the scripture passage you just read encourage us to create emotional safety? What's the purpose of diversity in the church?

Question 2
As a group of students, and as members of a church, where do we need to grow in nurturing emotional safety? How can we spread feelings of acceptance, love, and value to all of our friends and neighbors at WPC?
GO AND DO
WATERING THE GARDEN OF EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Share Your Innermost Thoughts
Opening up about our hopes, fears, dreams, and desires is a risky thing, and some of us may find this process really difficult—especially if we're used to hiding our emotions. Be patient with yourself and others in this. Sharing who we truly are and how we truly feel is essential to building emotional safety in our relationships. When we are vulnerable with those we love, we invite them to know us more deeply, and in turn we create a relational environment where they can be known and heard as well.

Be Curious, Not Judgmental
All of us experience differences, disagreements, and conflict with people we love. This is perfectly normal! What matters is how we handle these situations. The next time you find yourself in a disagreement with someone, try responding with curiosity instead of judgment. Say something like this, "I'd really like to learn more about why you think that. Can you help me understand?" Where judgment closes down conversation, curiosity invites new knowledge and understanding. And remember, you don't have to agree with someone to try to understand them!

Offer Validation
When someone is sharing vulnerable feelings with you, try to help them feel heard: things like nodding your head, or small feedback statements like, "I can see why you would feel that way," or, "In your shoes, I might feel the same way." These are signals to the other person that you are actively listening, and that you are empathetically engaged in the conversation. Compassionately recognizing the other person's viewpoint will help them feel heard, safe, and known—all of which are core components of emotional safety.
DON'T FORGET TO CHECK OUT OUR NEW WEBPAGE!
Click the logo for the latest resources and announcements