Transcript of episode 068:

When Neurodiversity Meets Existentialism

Emily Kircher-Morris: Hey there. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. Welcome to episode 68.

At the time of this recording, the world is still in the grips of the coronavirus pandemic. Deaths around the world topped 1 million this week. And in the US we reached the grim milestone of 200,000 deaths from COVID-19. We're in territory that few people alive today have experienced. And as parents, educators, and counselors we're fielding questions from our neurodivergent kids about what it all means. So today we're talking about existentialism with our guest Leon Garber, who is the author of the blog Leon's Existential Cafe. And together with Alen Ulman, host the Seize the Moment Podcast. Stay with us for that conversation.

Don't forget that we are available on Facebook and Twitter to continue the conversation. If you have questions or something to say, we are Mind Matters Podcast on Facebook and @MindMattersPod on Twitter.

Leon Garber: So hi guys. My name is Leon Garber. I'm a psychotherapist based in New York and my specialties are existential psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and psychoanalysis.

Emily Kircher-Morris: That conversation is next.

(break)

Today, we're talking with the author of Leon's Existential Cafe. He's a licensed mental health counselor/psychotherapist, and he specializes in existential therapy as well as cognitive behavioral and trauma therapies. Leon, thanks for sitting in today.

Leon Garber: Thank you so much for having me on.

Emily Kircher-Morris: So we're going to talk today about existentialism and how that relates to the development of high-ability or twice-exceptional kids. But why don't we just start with you giving us a little bit of background about what brought you into the world of existential psychotherapy and what that means for you?

Leon Garber: Thank you so much for asking. So, uh, when I was a bit younger, I used to have a deep interest in philosophy. And so long ago before I was a psychotherapist, I was sort of an amateur philosopher. And I remember when I was a kid, I would frequently ask my mom,

you know, sort of what's the point of life? What happens when we die? Who are we? What does it mean to be a human being? All of these questions that essentially my mom had very few answers to. Um, and then so as I kind of grew up and I became a college student, I realized, Oh, wow, there's actually a whole field interested in all of these questions too - philosophy. And so as I became interested in philosophy, I feel like... although I didn't exactly get the answers to the questions I was looking for, I was given sort of more profound the questions to even think about. So um, an example of this is, even, what is death? Like, what do we talk about, or what do we think about, when we talk about death? What does it mean to even be a human? What does it mean to be alive? Is a human somebody who has a heart and a brain, or can we sort of mimic that? Right? And it's like, if we can create a robot who has those same qualities, does that make them a human too? So I'm not necessarily sure that I found the answers to the questions I was looking for, but I did gain different perspectives on how to look at them.

And so bringing me into psychotherapy, I find that we don't exactly have the answers people are looking for in terms of their own lives. Um, so in terms of, you know, what is the meaning or what is my purpose of being here? Um, what is it that I can do to make myself happy? But what we can do is we could sort of, conceptually speaking, we could give them different perspectives on how to look at those questions.

So if somebody were to ask themselves, um, what is sort of meaningful to me, we can begin by asking them, what are your values? What's important to you? Why is it important to you? And so then that person can look at all of these different perspectives, and I mean, essentially what happens with existentialism is hopefully toward the end of treatment, they find a kind of a perspective and a vision that works for them.

Emily Kircher-Morris: Yeah. You mentioned that you were always interested in philosophy, and I know you also have a blog and a podcast, which kind of blend that, you know, kind of the psychotherapy and the philosophy piece. Talk about those just for a second so people can kind of know what your work is there.

Leon Garber: So I'm my blog is Leon's Existential Cafe. Um, and so most of what I write about is, uh, kind of existential issues. So we, I talk about death, um, sort of self esteem, well, not self esteem in that respect. So let me just go through the givens first. So I speak about death. I speak about a kind of existential isolation that we all experience. The fact that you and I will always have a distance between us and that in some sense, we are alone. It's like we are, and we aren't. And, um, the fact that people struggle was finding and creating meaning in their lives. Also in addition to that, the fear, freedom, the fear of making a mistake in choosing how to live my life. What if I don't live my life the right way? What if I find out that in the afterlife, I actually made these grand mistakes and now I'm going to be punished for them?

And so I talk about those things in addition to more personal issues, like let's say self esteem, uh, which I kind of, I definitely focus on greatly. Um, it's a kind of topic important to me cause at the center of most of our issues is literally a lack of self esteem and a lack of self love. And then I also talk about interpersonal issues with our kind of relationships and the

relationship struggles that we have, which again, a lot of times go back to self esteem and lack thereof.

The podcast is one that, which obviously you've been on, I host with my cohost Alen. So we pretty much, we have different, uh, thinkers and different sort of, uh... okay, I hesitate to use the word influencers, but you guys are all influencers. So we pretty much have thinkers in psychology, thinkers in philosophy, um, because Alen's more geared toward the self development aspect of it.

So we have thinkers and kind of in the personal development, growth movement or field. And so what we do is we have a lot of these people come on the shows, likeEmily, and so, because we can't know everything, right? So, um, I would love to maybe get to a point, which I think is very idealistic to host a podcast, you know, by ourselves where we just give all of this great information to people. And to some extent we do, but the thing is we can't know everything. I mean, it's just, it's not possible.

So I'm him and I one day just kind of like, you know, uh, what's the word we were just sort of, um, just, just thinking and brainstorming and we were wondering, you know, what is it that we would like to do? Like, uh, what is it that we'd love to do and what is it that we would like to do kind of with our lives? And so, uh, we talked about how much we loved reading and how much we get from books like, um, so we have a lot of books in common. Alen loves like Viktor Frankl and sort of the existentialist school, just like I do, and he loves a lot of read, a lot of books by readers, like, or writers like Tim Ferris and people that pretty much help you grow, people that help you mature. And so for Alen, you know, we thought, we thought, well, how cool would it be to get a bunch of these people on our show to literally learn from them directly and to be able to ask them the questions that maybe we haven't found the answers to?

So, um, obviously a lot of times when people come on podcasts,, not all of the podcast hosts are going to have the same questions.

Emily Kircher-Morris: Yeah.

Leon Garber: So we often found ourselves, um, kind of, there was sort of a deficit where we found ourselves wanting more when we saw our kind of our heroes, I guess. We saw them on podcasts, and we thought, imagine if we could get some of these people on and ask them the questions that maybe weren't normally asked. And imagine what that would be like for an audience, because this way, not only do we get the person, and you know, these people to contribute to their own fans, but then we also get them to contribute to us and our audience.

And so we've kind of tried to put this thing together where we just thought, you know, we feel like, for us more so than anything, it helped us learn. But then for us, we also thought that just by asking the right questions, that we can also broaden kind of, um, I guess the knowledge base of our own audience.

Emily Kircher-Morris: You mentioned at the beginning that when you were a kid, you started having some of these questions. How old were you when, when you started thinking about some of these things?

Leon Garber: Wow man, I would say somewhere around 6 or 7 years old. I used to literally bug my mom. My mom would feel like, I don't know what else to tell you! So I would be like this kid who's like, why is the sky blue? Why are there fish in the sea rather than on the land? So I would ask her a million questions, and eventually came to these existential ones. Um, I don't remember exactly when I found out what it means to die, or what death could be, but I do remember I was like, why do people have to die? It doesn't make any sense. It's like, we're alive one minute and then we're not.

Emily Kircher-Morris: And so did you notice at the time that those were questions that other kids weren't asking?

Leon Garber: Yeah. That was fairly obvious.

Emily Kircher-Morris: And that's kind of what brings it back to where we're talking about. You know, I think that in general, there are some people who are, who are driven and question these things just naturally, they just ask those big picture questions. There are definitely others who, who I think they're more satisfied with the answers that they find perhaps, and they don't, they don't dwell on them quite as much. And, and with the population that I work, with with those high ability kids, and the twice exceptional kids, quite often, we see that this happens perhaps earlier than it does with their peers. So for example, you mentioned death, you know, as one of the concepts that's involved in existentialism.

Most kids don't really understand the permanence of death, that, you know, it's irreversible, um, you know, that it's universal for all beings, you know, until really adolescents like age 10 to 12. But a lot of times you'll see kids even younger who are asking those questions and understand those concepts at a young age, which then is hard because they don't have the life experience behind them to put that into context.

Right, yeah. And I mean, interestingly, what sometimes also happens, um, there's some sort of early form of trauma that unfortunately, even if there's, um, even if it's not someone like me, who's just asking a million questions, sometimes they have to face death at an earlier age than it's kind of expected and hoped for. And then you often have a situation where there's this sort of a dual silence, where there's a silence from the family about the trauma, and then there's also silence from the family about these deeper questions or these deeper, I guess, answers, these deeper thoughts about death.

So the kid can kind of be double isolated, where they're not allowed to talk about some of these experiences that made them sort of hyper-focused on death, but then they're also not allowed to speak about death either. So it's like, there's just a sort of overall general anxiety and the kind of fear of life, but then obviously conversely, also a fear of death, and that can be really frightening for somebody who isn't obviously able to piece it together themselves.

Emily Kircher-Morris: Yeah. I think there's also a component too, of adults not knowing how to answer those questions.

Leon Garber: Right.

Emily Kircher-Morris: You know, I wonder how your mom handled it. She kind of did the best she could or she'd tell you I'll talk to you when you're older or what?

Leon Garber: Well, I mean, she has a belief system, so my mom believes in reincarnation and then she believes in spirituality. Um, the problem with me was that I wanted proof of the belief system. So what she was like, Oh no, well, we kind of get reincarnated and we go into different bodies or whatnot. And you know, she's like, you know, a long time ago, Uh, we were probably like, you know, animals and then, you know, we kind of like evolved or whatever through our lives, we became like humans and then, you know, sort of the point of life is to grow. Right? And I was like, Oh, okay. How do you know that? And I think, how do we know any of these things? So that she couldn't answer. She said, well, you know, you have to like consult some of the spiritual people are the ones who knows these answers. Uh, but yeah, she did the best she could.

Emily Kircher-Morris: I love it. I have clients come in of all of, you know, especially at the adolescent age and they like to come in and they go, I'm having an existential crisis. And I don't know that they always really know what that means. What does that term mean to you or, or when did those existential questions perhaps start to cause some concerns?

Leon Garber: Oh, that's a really good question. Um, so usually for the most part, what an existential crisis means to me is that it's, somebody's struggling with the meaning of their life. And so what happens is a person would come in, they'd come into treatment and they would say, Oh, I've made all of these big mistakes. I married the wrong person. Um, I chose the wrong career. I'm 45 now. I don't know why I made these decisions. I was a people pleaser. Um, let's say maybe I made these decisions, you know, for status or for wealth or, you know, because I felt like I needed to prove something to someone.

And so what happens is they kind of look back on their lives eventually and think, Oh my God, I can't believe I made these choices and now I really have to live with them. So going back to those givens of existence, that focus, or that is a focus of, um, existential freedom, the idea that essentially there is no cosmic blueprint for you or not one we know of.

And so, because that's the case, people essentially get to choose what they want their lives to be. So of course, we're going to be influenced by societal factors. Of course, we're going to be influenced by our family members, but sometimes people unfortunately live to regret those decisions. And so when there's a sort of a, either an existential crisis or a midlife crisis, what happens is a person begins to contemplate all their decisions in the context of their values and they ask themselves how important are these things to me now? Or how important were they to me ever? And why is it that I've lived my life in such a way? Kind of like, if you've ever heard that Metallica song and forgiven...

Emily Kircher-Morris: Yeah. (music)

Leon Garber: You have this person who's like kind of, um, he's in the cage, you know, this sort of metaphorical cage and he's realizing like, Oh my God, I've spent this entire life literally just living for other people, trying to make them happy. And then there's a lot of regret. Hopefully the person would come to therapy earlier, maybe hopefully in their twenties, thirties, forties, something along those lines.

I mean, it's never too late, but the point is that obviously, I mean, the older you get the deeper the regrets are. And then sometimes what happens is sometimes people can't face those regrets. So even though they kind of bubble at the surface and they'll come out, what happens is they don't want to deal with them. So it's like, they sort of pretend that everything is okay and they'll kind of revert back to their old way of thinking. But the problem is, with regrets, just like in the Metallica song, they never just disappear. I mean you could kind of suppress them all you want, but they'll eventually foster again, or sort of come up again.

Emily Kircher-Morris: What are some of the younger clients that you've seen, who've dealt with some of these things? Have you had some younger clients who experienced this maybe even before they officially reach adulthood?

Leon Garber: Yes. So then we're going back to the conversation about trauma. So usually, I mean, in most cases and I've had this happen only a few times, is a, essentially a client will come in and, um, well, their parents will tell me that they've struggled with some sort of abuse, um, some sort of feeling of unsafety, uh, the feeling that they were, you know, kind of their lives were out of control. They knew, I don't remember exactly how, but they knew that they were sort of unsafe to the point that they could have died.

And so what happens is there's nobody in the household who can help them integrate the experience with the concept of death, with a sort of sense of optimism about just life in general. And so when they come, they're pretty much terrified of death because they were placed on this experience where they literally thought they were going to die, or they thought that they have at least could have died.

Or there was some sort of chronic trauma where they every single kind of evening or whatever it was, they were, pretty much, they felt unsafe. And so when they come to therapy, there's a kind of, um, this is kind of existential terror that at any moment, something terrible could happen to them.

Emily Kircher-Morris: So they come in with this trauma and they're trying to integrate all of this. And so that integration. What are the strategies that you use to help people integrate those fears or those questions with their daily life?

Leon Garber: You can kind of start at it from either end. There's not really a blueprint in that sense. So you can start with the, so I would say if I had to, my hunch is that most people would prefer to go from the general to the specific.

So, um, most of the clients, interestingly, I guess if, um, when they sort of approach me because they say, Hey, you know, we like that you're an existential therapist, it's actually because they don't want to deal with the personal issues. And so, I mean, but again, you can

come at it from either way. It's okay, there's no direct blueprint, but the thing is like, when they talk, when they talk to you, they say, well, you know, I want to talk to you about my fear of death, right? Or let's say when a child's mom will bring them in, they say, well, you know, like she, she she's really afraid of dying. Um, she just needs help, but she doesn't know how to deal with it, right, and I don't really know how to help her. And that's okay. So we talk to them about kind of like this sort of, again, going back to the existential questions and I would ask, okay, so like, what is it that you're afraid of when you think about death? Um, what does death mean to you? Have you ever experienced anybody dying? What was that like? Um, have you ever seen anybody go through a bad death? Have you ever seen anybody experience a good death? What's the difference to you? And as we kind of talk about these things, hopefully and ideally, what happens is they become a little bit less afraid of it. And then kind of as you're going through therapy and the person realizes, okay, death is scary, because...

So just the misconception before I continue is usually that we want to get people to like, just not be afraid of death at all. That's not possible. Right? So everybody's going to be afraid of death no matter who they are. But the point is that we want to get their terror or their death fear from a terror level which is like, let's say at a 10, to maybe something that's like at a five or a six, which is pretty much normal and manageable, something that you and I probably experienced on a daily basis, because I do think about death that I am afraid of death, and I don't think that that's ever going to go away. So when we're talking to even kids, right, we hope to get them to that point where now death is not so scary anymore. And hopefully by inference, right, if death isn't so scary, maybe sort of that fear of reliving the trauma again isn't as scary either. Right?

Of course, it's still going to be scary. And the point is not to get it from a 10 to a zero or... a hundred to a zero, but the point is for them to get to uh, to get to the point where they're now able to talk about it. So then once we were kind of, once we've gone past the death terror, again not fully going past it, but now we can kind of dive into the personal experiences.

But, um, but when it comes to the existential dread, I mean, we use a lot of like philosophical tools, right? So again, going back to the questions, so a lot of times I would ask, okay, so like, what is it that you're afraid of in death? Is it that you're afraid of the dying process? Is it you're afraid of maybe having a bad afterlife experience where you're punished for something? Um, do you feel like some of your shame is sort of going to be exposed in an afterlife potentially? Do you fear that you're not going to exist? Um, did you fear that something terrible might happen to your family if you're gone and that you won't be able to protect them? And so you kind of just help them explore it and as they explore it, what you can do is you can also empathize with, I mean, you could say, yeah, I have all of these same fears too. Like, these are all part of the human experience.

And so what I think helps most, even with kids, is not necessarily having the answers to these questions, but it's to be able to say, Hey, I'm right there with you. We're in the same boat. And we have these same questions too.

Emily Kircher-Morris: Our listeners can't see this, but I'm nodding vigorously along with this about, about, I think that brings it back to like authenticity, right? Like, this is part of the human condition, these questions. And kids don't always know that. Especially if they're kids who their peers don't have those same questions, you know? And if they try to talk to other kids, the kids were like, what are you talking about? I don't understand why you're even thinking about this.

Leon Garber: Right.

Emily Kircher-Morris: Um, and I think authenticity is kind of a big piece of, of what goes into this. Like if you're not living your true self, you know, like if you're not in that, you know, you're going to have more of that disconnect.

Leon Garber: Yeah, absolutely. And a lot of what works in therapy is literally the empathy part where you're able to say sort of I'm in your shoes too, that we're in this together.

And obviously it's a little bit easier with the general questions and then is with specific personal experiences like traumas. And that's okay because the thing is like, um, again, going back from general or going back to general to specific, what you're seeing is that, when, when the kid, especially in this case, can see that, Oh, wow, we're kind of like, we're almost the same or very, we're very similar, then that kind of builds trust to go into more of the more sort of deeper and personal work, the stuff that they don't really want to talk about.

Um, but what's cool about the existential questions. Is that again, we don't really have answers per se, but then we could kind of feel like we're connected and having the same questions. So unfortunately what sometimes happens is, you know, going back to the theme of authenticity, um, I guess it's still authentic even though maybe not really, where a therapist would kind of try to, um, they would try to sort of, what's the word? They would try to impose their own worldview on the, on the client. And they would say, Oh, well, this is what happens after death. Right? And here's why we know. Right? Whether, you know, whether you're an atheist or whether you're religious, I mean, any sort of sect can do that. So it doesn't, it's kind of relevant, but the point is that what happens then is, especially if the kid doesn't feel like they have answers to those questions, I mean, they'll feel like you're just some sort of authority figure that's sort of better and smarter than them and you're telling them what to do, kind of like a parent or a teacher. Unfortunately, in that respect, I mean, maybe they wouldn't feel as vulnerable opening up to you because again, I mean, I'm assuming that that's still a form of authenticity, but I would say not really, because in some sense, you're a little bit deluding yourself.

Um, because nobody really knows for sure. I mean, we could say like, I'm, you know, kinda more on this end, like, let's say I classify myself as an atheist, but I would never say I'm sure of any of these answers, that just doesn't make any sense. And so even if let's say the child is more religious, you can say, no, no, no, no, I feel the same level of uncertainty that you do too. We're kind of in that together. And then I would ask, does that uncertainty scare you? And let's say maybe he or she would say, yeah, it does. I would say, yeah, it scares me too, because like, what if there is an afterlife? Right? So what if I am making all of these mistakes, what if god punishes me? Right? Just like for you, the uncertainty you might be like, Oh my

God, what if I'm wrong? Or what if you know, there is no God? So the point is that we're in it together.

Emily Kircher-Morris: You've mentioned trauma, and I think the kids that I work with maybe are coming from a little bit of a different experience, but I think there's some, some parallels there. And I definitely also agree that I see those kids, that, that trauma is a big part of it, especially with the fear of death. But also, the neurodivergent kids that I work with, especially those who maybe have had, you know, an undiagnosed disability or something, part of what it is, is I think is just that lack of being understood and that lack of connection, kind of that isolation piece. Like I'm just, I don't feel connected to the world around me in any way. And so then that's very destabilizing. I remember a client who I had, who in second grade, I remember him saying to me how difficult his life was and how hard he was having, and he didn't see any sense of purpose in it. And he was crying and he was saying to me, if life is this hard now, how is it ever going to get easier? You know, and he's eight years old and he's thinking about these things. I was like, how do you, you know, it was, it was so fascinating to talk to him and work with him, but he just had this ability to see things in this wider range.

Leon Garber: Right. And I would say that on sort of the spectrum of isolation, he was pretty much on the further end where um, or one of the further ends where he believed that there was such a deep disconnect from the community or society at large, that there was no way that he was ever going to even feel, um, feel some sort of emotional connection or a deeper connection, just, just humanity. And, um, and so, I mean, the thing is with the existential isolation, so the point of it as a concept, it just means that essentially like you and I will always have this, you know, kind of unbridgeable gap between us, and that's okay. So I mean, the point where at least the point is to get to the point where you're feeling okay about it. The struggle is that sometimes it's that plus more. So for some people it's that, and then, Oh, well I feel like an outcast or I feel like a weirdo or I feel like an outsider. So I can also imagine that an existential crisis or existential depression can even encompass that. The sense of, um, not only just the unbridgeable physical gap, but seemingly at least unbridgeable emotional one too.

Emily Kircher-Morris: You mentioned that on your blog, you do some writing about self-esteem and those types of concepts. And I noticed, you know, one of the things that I've seen come up on your blog also is about perfectionism. Can you talk a little bit about the connection between existential awareness and perfectionism? Do you feel like there's a connection there between those two?

Leon Garber: Good question. Yes, but I actually haven't written about it, which is, I guess interesting cause now I probably can. Um, so interestingly with perfectionism, there's a, Oh, I can actually give you a personal experience, uh, which is... okay so it's a little bit embarrassing and a little bit silly to talk about, but I guess it's also somewhat part of the human condition. So, uh, with perfectionism, there's several components to it. So sometimes the, one of the components could be more existential. And so what I mean by that, it's this sort of magical thinking and this erroneous notion, if I'm just special or if I'm perfect, I'm not going to die or I'm not going to be harmed, or nothing terrible is going to

happen to me. So, I remember, I don't remember when I realized this, but it was definitely a part of like, kind of in my own life. So, I mean, I wish I could go back to it. Cause I mean, to me, at least this was really interesting. So there was a point in my life where I realized that the reason, at least partially, why I was a perfectionist was because I truly believed, and since, um, so for me, like death anxiety was prominent pretty much for the vast majority of my life. Well, death terror. And so I believe that if somehow I sort of, I did all of the right things and I did them in the exact order, somehow death wasn't going to find me.

And so it's this sort of, um, it's a sort of notion that, so it kind of goes back to, let's say Alfred Adler, who was a psychoanalyst in the Freudian era. So he said something along the lines of, in order to avoid the debt of death, people often refused the loan of life. But also in addition to that, I think people also try to perfect life.

So it's like in order to kind of... in order to steer death away from you, you think like, okay, listen death. As long as I do all of the right things, as long as I sort of succeed in the way that we're taught to succeed, as long as I'm a good person, um, as long as I sort of take care of myself and not overly depend on people, as long as I sort of give to charity, um, and I sort of, you know, do my schoolwork and I kind of hunker down and sort of take care of my business, you, you leave me alone. Right? You're supposed to leave me alone, you're not supposed to come after me. And so it's a, it's kind of like magical thinking. It's this idea that as long as you're doing things the right way, you know, quote unquote, perfect, then these terrible things aren't going to happen to you. And I mean, of course it's absurd because good things happen to good people all the time. And interestingly, even though on the sort of conscious level I do know this, on a deeper level there's a part of my life where I keep going back to that thought, especially by the way, when something like tragic either happens around me or happens sort of within my vicinity, I'll kind of notice that I'm like, Oh, I'm like, getting on these like rigid patterns again, what I'm sort of doing things in a very kind of, um, not necessarily obsessive, but at least close to it, in a sort of obsessive way where I say, no, I need to do this at this time. And I need to do this on that time. And I need to do this for this person. And I need to do this for myself. And I create these sort of patterns for myself. And then I look in and I sort of asked myself, I was like, Hmm, have I been a little bit too anxious about death and these past few weeks? And the answer is usually yes.

Emily Kircher-Morris: Yeah, that's interesting. That's really interesting. You know, you mentioned, um, Alfred Adler, who's one of my favorites, and you know, I remember, I think another quote that I know of his is, "all of life is a striving for perfection," which kind of goes along with this. So as we wrap up our conversation, let me, let me ask you this last question. And that is, what would you suggest for the adults in these young people's lives, who are having some of these questions? Like, is there one or two things that you think would be... Like what's the most impactful thing they can do to support these kids and help them.

Leon Garber: That's a really good question. So I would say it's a balance of empathy and support. So on the one hand, because a lot of times when adults don't talk to kids about, you know, kind of existential terror, about death, um, you know, freedom or whatnot, it's because they don't have the answers themselves and they feel like they need to. So it's the idea of I'd rather avoid than kind of just be honest and authentic.

And so on the one hand you can definitely be empathic and you could say, Hey, I don't know. Right? I wish I had these answers, but I don't. Right? So it's kind of like one of those questions that nobody really has the answer to. And then obviously that will engender some sort of fear or no, you know, the child will feel anxious. And then one could say like, no, but that's okay. So even though we don't know the answers to any of these questions, we actually don't need to, because we can have, and we could lead very healthy and full and safe lives. And so if you ever feel like you're unsafe, right, because I don't have the answers to the afterlife, here are all of the things that, you know, your father and I, or our family on the whole or whomever, these are all of the things that we'll do to protect you. And these are all the things that we have been doing to protect you. So, although, no, we don't know what happens after we die, the point is that we can still live a healthy and safe life even without having those answers, because I mean, people have been doing it for millennia somehow.

Emily Kircher-Morris: Leon, thank you so much for your time today.

Leon Garber: Thank you so much for having me on, this was great.

Emily Kircher-Morris: Life's big questions, surrounding our death, freedom, isolation, and the search for meaning, are questions that each of us grapple with throughout our life. Neurodivergent kids experience the world in a way that gives them a different perspective. Sometimes coming to realize the permanence of these concerns at a younger age., and sometimes having a hard time putting those things into perspective. The need for things to make sense, and an ability to understand abstract concepts at an early age, leads them to question and make realizations that emotionally, they may not be ready to handle.

I've had clients at my office who become worried and stressed every year around their birthday, as it reminds them even at the age of six or seven, about aging and death. Little ones who aren't even in elementary school yet, who clearly grasp that death is universal and irreversible, and they worry about their loved ones. High school students who question everything, and have trouble staying motivated at school because of their obsession with existential topics. I find this one of the most rewarding areas to help kids get through. It allows me to deepen my own awareness and understanding of the universe and humanity. We can support these kids by refusing to minimize their worries, validating their emotions, and helping them to explore and crystallize their own belief systems that help put their world in order.

I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on Mind Matters.

(music)

Dave Morris: Thank you again to Leon Garber. Leon's website is existentialcafe.blog. You can also find his podcast, Seize the Moment, wherever you get your podcasts. Also, thanks to new Patreon patrons and/or PayPal contributors, including Marla, Leitha, Jay, Michelle, Robin, Julian, Valerie, Emily, Giran, Julianne, and Monica. Thank you for listening and spreading the word. I'm executive producer, Dave Morris. I'm also Emily's wine sommelier. Stay safe. Stay healthy. See you next time.

(music)

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