Emotionally Speaking - Virginia Ironside transcript.

Peter Leonard 00:00
Hello and welcome to Emotionally Speaking.

Narrator (Heather) 00:02
This is Peter Leonard. He is Chief Executive of The Centre for Emotional Health.

Peter Leonard 00:08
This is a new podcast about emotions, your emotions, how you relate to your emotional self, and to other people.

Narrator (Heather) 00:16
And this is Emotionally Speaking, a new podcast from The Centre for Emotional Health.

Peter Leonard 00:23
In each episode, I invite a guest to talk about challenging moments in their life. We'll explore together what happened, and how they found ways to cope. And my hope is that we'll gradually build up an emotional toolkit, and that some of these tools and coping mechanisms might be helpful for us as well. A big part of our work at the Centre for Emotional Health is on building the capabilities of adults in the lives of children. And a book that we've used for years as part of our training is The Huge Bag of Worries. It tells a story of a young girl called Jenny, who carries around this big bag of worries, and how she learns to live with it and to deal with it. I think what's brilliant about it for me is that it reminds us adults, that worries can be a big part of childhood. In fact, the story is relevant to anyone of any age.

Virginia Ironside 01:20
"Nonsense," said the old lady firmly, "there's nothing a worry hates more than being seen. If you have any worries, however small, the secret is to let them out slowly, one by one, and show them to someone else. They'll soon go away."

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Peter Leonard 01:37
The book's written by an amazing woman called Virginia Ironside and so she seemed the obvious choice to come in and have a conversation with us. I'm so grateful for you to coming in and doing this.

Virginia Ironside 01:48
It's good fun. Always nice to be asked one's opinion.

Peter Leonard 01:56
I'm really thrilled to be joined today by Virginia Ironside. Virginia is a journalist, author, and agony aunt. Her prolific career started as a music critic in the 1960s interviewing the biggest stars of the decade like The Beatles, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix. She has written several novels and children's books and has been an agony aunt for many years. She writes regularly for The Oldie and The Idler. Virginia, Hello!

Virginia Ironside 02:26
Hello!

Peter Leonard 02:27
It's so lovely to have you with us. It's really nice to meet you. We're big fans of your writing at the Centre for Emotional Health, especially your children's book, The Huge Bag of Worries.

Virginia Ironside 02:38
Oh well, thank you so much. That's been an amazing hit, it's been in print for ages. It's one... I'm so thrilled about it.

Peter Leonard 02:45
It's great. It's a really lovely book. What inspired you to write a book about anxiety for children?

Virginia Ironside 02:51
I was asked by the Scottish version of the NSPCC, to write a booklet for all primary school leavers before they went to big school, to encourage them to express their worries about going to big school. So I wrote this terminally boring, dreary thing. It was very dull. And then I was about to send it off. And at night, in the middle of the night, I thought of this other idea. It was so good. I thought I know this is going to be a hit. And it was partly because it was so funny. The idea of this enormous bag that you hauled around, that nobody else can see. I mean, it makes me smile even now. And if you can laugh at awful things, it makes them so much less horrible. And now years and years later, it's been published in millions of different versions.

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Peter Leonard 03:46
It's brilliant. I was that's kind of over 25 years ago, isn't it?

Virginia Ironside 03:49
I know! Isn't it amazing!

Peter Leonard 03:50
And yet it still holds.

Virginia Ironside 03:52
Yes!

Peter Leonard 03:52
So much profound stuff in there.

Virginia Ironside 03:54
Yeah, of course, they desperately want me to write another one. All their suggestions are absolutely ghastly.... the little book of happiness? Well, no, that's not going to wash with me. No...

Peter Leonard 04:07
Absolutely. I think we could almost do a whole podcast on how you can't get happiness into a little book couldn't we? But we're going to be thinking about emotional health. And we are an organisation that raises awareness of emotional health working with a whole range of different people. And so I was wondering, what does emotional health mean to you?

Virginia Ironside 04:27
I don't like the idea that there's a norm. All you can do emotionally is try to get by so that you're reasonably content, and you don't make anybody else miserable. That's about it. But throughout one's life one's always hurting other people and people are hurting you and this is part of life. And I think we all find our own paths and ways of doing it. Some people do it by charm. Some people do it by spending a lot of money on other people. I mean, it doesn't really matter. But as long as it works for everyone.

Peter Leonard 05:03
Yes. It isn't just a thing that you can manage on your own...

Virginia Ironside 05:07
It's not a tick box thing no...

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Peter Leonard 05:10
and develops and changes throughout your lifetime.

Virginia Ironside 05:12
Oh all your life, yes, exactly. And that's why being an agony aunt now is, firstly, interesting, because I'm writing for The Oldie. And therefore, there are many different problems for old people than there used to be when I was working for a woman's magazine and things like that. But also, my attitudes change all the time. And that's so interesting. I don't give the same answers as I used to.

Peter Leonard 05:38
That's good. It's good. As I often say, when people ask me a question, I say my first answer is not my, my final answer.

Virginia Ironside 05:45
It's a very good phrase.

Peter Leonard 05:46
There's something about thinking aloud that can be really helpful process.

Virginia Ironside 05:51
It can, yes.

Peter Leonard 05:52
Which kind of links straight back to The Huge Bag of Worries, isn't it?

Virginia Ironside 05:56
Yes.

Peter Leonard 05:56
And kind of naming the worries. So what we're kind of alluding to here is self awareness, awareness of what's going on for you, what's going on for other people and the relationship between that. I wonder if you can tell me a bit more, we talked a little bit before we started recording about the little voice inside you. I wonder if you could say a bit more about that?

Virginia Ironside 06:15
Well, I usually have a sort of revelation about once every couple of months. My latest is that I may not always be right. Now that sounds odd. But I'm someone with very strong opinions. And I have a very,

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very strong, intuitive sense, and a very strong moral sense, actually. But what I've discovered recently, and it's partly because a relative of mine had a child who had body dysmorphia, which means that she believed that she was hideous. And that was a conviction. She was actually beautiful. But she believed she was hideous, and she killed herself. And I suddenly thought, I wonder if I hold any deeply held beliefs that actually are wrong? And I realised I do and I often think I've got the answer. This is how it works; I've nailed it, usually about someone else. And it turns out that I'm wildly off key not always, because I think one's intuition and one's heart and all kinds of other factors come into play when one's reaching a conclusion about what to do or what's going on. But they're not always right. I think I have these convictions rather like my daughter of my friend, that my intuition is telling me this is wrong. This is right. Maybe it's not any of that. Maybe I'm wrong. And it happens. Particularly if somebody doesn't ring me back, a friend, this is so common it 's with everyone. You ring and you say 'oh, do ring me', and nothing happens. And then you go back over your last conversation and you think ah, it's because I said, I didn't like those scones you made as much as the ones you made before or, I don't know... you're convinced that that's made them turn against you. And then when you actually mention it to them, they have no memory of you saying that at all. So your intuition is not always right. So I think the best advice is, am I wrong? Could it be seen any other way? Maybe they were just feeling a bit ill maybe their phone was out of order? Maybe.... it's not all about you.

Peter Leonard 08:18
No...

Virginia Ironside 08:37
Just relax a bit. So that's been a great help to me, actually.

Peter Leonard 08:43
That's a really helpful kind of coping mechanism is that just stopping and asking yourself that question, am I right? Am I wrong? And I'm sure I think what you're describing is so common, I can certainly relate to it. And I think especially these days, where so much is done over text messages and WhatsApp messages...

Virginia Ironside 09:02
Yes

Peter Leonard 09:03
That those kinds of messages are so easy to read something else into, aren't they?

Virginia Ironside 09:07
Absolutely.

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Peter Leonard 09:08
You're in a constant conversation with someone and you always end the message with a kiss. And then one day they don't and you think 'oh!'

Virginia Ironside 09:14
Yeah,

Peter Leonard 09:14
And it might simply be they're in a rush and they've forgotten it. But in your head you're thinking oh that's it they don't like me anymore. And it just becomes huge, doesn't it?

Virginia Ironside 09:22
Yes, exactly. Or three kisses for a year and then two...help, what have I done!?

Peter Leonard 09:28
Yes. Yeah. Exactly.

Virginia Ironside 09:28
They hate me.

Peter Leonard 09:30
It is this asking this question. And this is there's a real kind of exercise in self awareness here and asking myself these questions, you know, what's going on here? Am I right? Yes, and that but that...

Virginia Ironside 09:42
I don't think one need ignore that little voice which says it's your fault. You've slipped up, you've hurt them. You give them a seat at the table when you're making your decision. But you do take into account experience, which is usually look, you've been friends for 25 years and logic, your brain. So give them all equal value, but too easily I think we give the emotional or intuitive response, the biggest say, and they're important to take into account but not to be led by.

Peter Leonard 10:24
Yeah, yeah, I think that's a really helpful, that's really helpful advice. I think something I'm definitely going to try because I absolutely do the overthinking, especially around messages. So I'm totally going to do that.

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Peter Leonard 10:43
When you started working as a music critic, you were 19 years old. That's quite a world to suddenly be thrust into as a 19 year old, talking to these big hitters like, you know, Janis Joplin and The Beatles. Did you get that kind of sense of 'Oh, my goodness', the anxiety, then?

Virginia Ironside 11:01
Oh, yes, I've always been anxious, but particularly then, because I thought they were stars, and I was just some kind of idiot person who got into journalism, out of luck, really. And I felt terribly intimidated by them. And they were intimidating. A lot of them were, I mean, Jimi Hendrix came from street life, I could hardly understand what he said. And a lot of the groups were from the north, and they had real accents. In those days, you couldn't decipher what they were saying. And they all had a kind of way of communicating with each other. And I always felt a fish out of water. But what I've only recently and again, that's one of the good things about being older, realised, is that actually, maybe they were terrified of me. I was right. My intuition was right, there was terror and fear around. But maybe it was their fear and not mine. And I never thought about that. Now, I'm old. And this is another thing that has really helped me being older. I tried to think of people as my children. And it just makes me so much kinder to people. I dodn't mean I'm patronising or tell them to look both ways when they cross the road or anything like that. But it takes a threat out of them. And you see them as the vulnerable people, they and you are. I found calling people darling helps. It's funny, you just call people darling. And the ability to terrify you just goes.

Peter Leonard 12:46
Yes. Yeah, no, that's great. That's what we want all these little tips to help us kind of navigate these, these kinds of anxieties and, and feelings we have, we had a very brief conversation before we started recording about a hotel I'd been in recently. And when you approach the reception desk, they every person who worked on reception desk, looked up and smiled. And it just makes such a difference, doesn't it it's something about relationships. And it doesn't even have to have to have words sometimes I think, words, the word darling has clearly helped. But a smile can be just as powerful, can't it?

Virginia Ironside 13:17
A smile or some kind of touch. And shaking hands is a brilliant way of doing that. And it's a shame really that COVID has rather stopped that habit, but I'm old fashioned. And the minute I meet someone, my hand goes right out. And I try to look them in the eye. And gosh, it makes a difference.

Peter Leonard 13:38
Yeah, it's immediate human connections, immediate establishment of some kind of relationship. And I think when we talk about things like emotional health, people often think of it as being quite a quite a

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fluffy thing. But there are some really definite things that can be done. Like asking myself the question, am I right here? Am I wrong? Yes. Like putting your hand out and making a connection.

Virginia Ironside 13:57
Yes.

Peter Leonard 13:58
We talk in our training programmes about empathy as being a really powerful way of connecting with someone and relationship building. So I think there are definite things you can do.

Virginia Ironside 14:07
There are.

Peter Leonard 14:07
And it's, and I guess, you know, part of your role as an agony aunt is kind of helping people to establish that.

Virginia Ironside 14:14
And the other thing is standing up -- it's not very easy for me now I'm much older -- but if you can always stand up when anybody comes into the room it, Gosh, it makes a difference. I've said this to a friend of mine, I was staying the weekend, and he always got up even at breakfast and I said, you don't have to get up. And he said, Oh, I always get up. He said, and particularly for children. I thought gosh that's a very good tip. So now I get up for children and I shake their hand and they are very confused. But it's an acknowledgement of them they're not used to at all of being actually acknowledged by a strange adult. Uh, I mean, I couldn't do it to a stranger, you know, in a bus, but...

Peter Leonard 15:03
But if there's a need for some kind of human connection, yeah.

Virginia Ironside 15:07
Because they're in a very vulnerable position and they don't have a say usually and, and there I am saying "And what's your name? And mine's Virginia".

Peter Leonard 15:08
I'm really struck how small things can have a big impact, small things can become bigger things and that can work in a negative way, in the sense that small anxiety can very quickly become something much bigger. But my sense is that a small action can also have a very positive effect.

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Virginia Ironside 15:34
it certainly can. Absolutely those things are crucial. And very easy to do.

Peter Leonard 15:41
Absolutely. So paying regard to those small things, whether they're, oh, gosh, this is a red flag, there's something going on here, I might need to think about or, actually, I'm going to do something small because I'm going to establish a relationship, I'm going to put a marker down about how this is going to be positive.

Virginia Ironside 15:57
Yes

Peter Leonard 15:58
And healthy. I think that they're really important. I wonder if I can ask you, Virginia about your book, Janie and Me, you've written about your relationship in that book with your alcoholic mother. I'm wondering how anxiety and the emotional experience of how that's affected you what it what it was like?

Virginia Ironside 16:16
I've discovered that most agony aunts and people in the caring professions, so called, often have a troublesome parent. And I think what it does is it makes you very, very intuitive, or can do not, not in every case, because you're always thinking, are they drinking? Are they drunk? Are they going to drink? What can I do? What can I do to make them sober? How can I help them be happy? It's a constant, terrible inner dialogue, which dogs me even now. But that has helped me be an agony aunt. So that's what's happened to me. That's the effect that her alcoholism had on me. I have just to say that she was an immensely successful and funny and brilliant woman. And you know, lovely in many ways... hopeless at being a mother. But otherwise, a star.

Peter Leonard 17:16
There's lots of scientific evidence that, that that kind of experience as a child, kind of wires the brain so that when you become an adult, you respond in particular ways or perhaps over respond to a stimulus thinking, the same thing is gonna happen. Have you had experience of that, or...?

Virginia Ironside 17:30
Oh, yes. Because I'm always anticipating horror or drama. I think I've become quite good at just being a bit of a peacemaker, or I'm always trying to make allowances or... and also, if I do feel angry, I feel I do bitch about people behind their backs, but it's always behind their backs. Never in person. I just, I don't know, it's a funny relationship, that alcoholic one. And the worst thing, of course, with alcoholics is that

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the alcohol problem that they suffer from gets transferred, oddly, to you so that they're preoccupied with the bottle and so, do you become preoccupied? Because you're always worrying, where is the drink? Should I pour it down the sink? Should I tell them not to drink? Should I tell my host, can you just give her a very small one watered down? Your brain gets full of alcohol. I mean, even if you're not drinking its just there all the time. And what I did learn was by going to Al Anon, which is the sister group of AA, which is a group for alcoholics, that the best way to deal with a real alcoholic, after all other things have failed, is to detach with love. So you love the person, but you don't love the alcohol, and you let them drink. You don't say don't drink or put your hand over their glass or anything. And you tell them you say, look, this is your problem. This is nothing to do with me. If you want to go out and get drunk every night. That's fine. I've seen it happen. I did do it to a partner had an extraordinary effect on him. Because all the time we'd been together. I was the one doing the worrying about his drinking. Suddenly, no one was doing the worrying. The worry had to go somewhere. And it went to him where it should be because there was nowhere else for it to go. He started to get nervous about his drinking, because I couldn't care less. It's a wonderful dynamic that.

Peter Leonard 19:47
There's something very powerful because it's so easy, especially in a in a close relationship with someone friend or family member to... you end up carrying the worry and the worry becomes your worry.

Virginia Ironside 19:56
I wish I'd done it to my mother.

Peter Leonard 19:58
Yes.

Virginia Ironside 19:58
But it's very difficult. It's easy to say. But...

Peter Leonard 20:00
These things are often easier to talk about than they are to actually physically do aren't they.

Virginia Ironside 20:01
I know, I know they are.

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Peter Leonard 20:02
So, I'm wondering how, you know, in your role as an agony aunt, because I'm imagining you're presented with a lot of people's worries. How do you, how do you kind of ensure that doesn't sit too heavily with you?

Virginia Ironside 20:18
Oh, it never did. I've never, except for the odd letter about child abuse, or animal abuse. They did worry me. And they were horrible. But nothing else. Because, again, probably, because I'm arrogant, I always could see a solution. And even if I couldn't, which is very rare, I'd say, there doesn't seem to be a solution to your problem. And you're not going to accept because you've already gathered, they wouldn't accept any advice. What do you think you're going to do? You've either got to live with this, or you've got to do something, I can help you. But if you won't take that help, there's nothing I can do. So you have to ask yourself the question, why aren't I accepting help? And that is your answer.

Peter Leonard 21:09
But again, there's something there about detaching with love.

Virginia Ironside 21:11
Exactly.

Peter Leonard 21:12
It kind of, features in, yeah.. You've obviously been doing that work for a while now has has the kind the kind of worries and anxieties that people write to you about have they remained consistent, have they changed over the years?

Virginia Ironside 21:28
I suppose the subjects have changed, but the emotion is always the same. It's guilt, self hatred, loneliness, fear, mainly, and a longing to be loved. And that's why I think it's so important for children, tiny babies and children to be loved, and for their parents or someone to be there all the time. And for years, to always be there loving them. And it's not that easy.

Peter Leonard 22:03
As an organisation, we run training courses for the families, yes, professionals working with children, or adults. And it's based on something we call The Nurturing Programme. And it is all about taking a very nurturing approach to yourself.

Virginia Ironside 22:18
Yeah.

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Peter Leonard 22:18
And to one another. Yes. So it is absolutely about that, you know, as we've said, making that that connection with someone shaking their hands smiling at them, and, you know, empathy, showing them empathy and kindness. But it's also about doing that to yourself.

Virginia Ironside 22:30
Exactly. And that was the one that often that's....

Peter Leonard 22:33
That's the hardest thing.

Virginia Ironside 22:34
It's impossible. I've been trying that for all my life, and I still find it... Well, it's a mystery to me. It's not how I work. But...

Peter Leonard 22:44
I'm just wondering, has that has there ever been a time where you think I did look after myself in that moment well?

Virginia Ironside 22:50
Occasionally, I mean, I'm not a very good person to talk to, because I have always been pretty depressed all my life. And even now, I've got a very good front. But actually, I'm... the idea of death does not terrify me at all. So yeah, I haven't been very good at it. And that's why I spend I still see a counsellor. Having seen one, ever since I was about 25. I've been in The Priory three times. I suppose that could be a good qualification for giving advice or a bad one, I'm not sure!

Peter Leonard 23:27
I think it's I think that seeking help when you require it, is a really healthy thing to do.

Virginia Ironside 23:34
Yes.

Peter Leonard 23:34
I know for myself, there are times when life is difficult when I've hit a patch of poor mental health. And sometimes I think, okay, I can see what's going on here. I need to, I need a break, or I need to spend time with friends. And other times it's actually I need to go and see a professional now, because this has gone to the extent where I can't do this simply by tweaking I need to get something significant.

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Virginia Ironside 23:54
No...

Peter Leonard 23:54
I think there's something very emotionally healthy about saying I need to get some help now, and going and getting it. I think that's, that's actually quite nurturing.

Virginia Ironside 24:01
Apparently, there was a survey done that said 90% of the healing ability of counselling is making the first phone call to the counsellor. So forget about all the talking. It's that seeking help. You're absolutely right. And the other thing is to remember that look here, you and I pretty successful in our own ways. You know, we're nutcases. We're emotional... well I don't know about you, but I am, and you've said that you have moments when you've had to seek help. This is the norm... to isolate it to mental health problems, well, we all have... it doesn't help really, it's just part of being human.

Peter Leonard 24:43
It is part of being human and that's absolutely what we at the Centre for Emotional Health are trying to get people to be aware of and to talk about. Saying actually, you know, managing your emotions is a very normal thing to do and recognise we need help.

Virginia Ironside 24:55
And not managing them.

Peter Leonard 24:56
And not managing them, absolutely, is also a normal place to be and and seeking help when you require it and, and talking about it as as we've been doing today is so important.

Virginia Ironside 25:06
Absolutely.

Peter Leonard 25:06
Which brings me straight back to the book. And I'm really struck by how much of what we've talked about today has sent me back to the book in terms of naming the worry, talking about the worry, asking questions about the worry, whose worry is this?

Virginia Ironside 25:21
Yes, exactly.

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Peter Leonard 25:23
I mean, it's a very, it's a beautiful book. It's very kind of straightforward. But there's some real, profound stuff in there about the human condition, I think.

Virginia Ironside 25:31
I think there is, I don't know where it came from. It can't have come from me, but it does work.

Peter Leonard 25:37
I think you're being very modest. I think you're a genius.

Peter Leonard 25:45
I'm gonna ask, if you will indulge me a bit, I'd love you to read one particular...

Virginia Ironside 25:50
Yes, of course

Peter Leonard 25:51
Bit from the book. And it's the bit where the old lady is helping Jenny who's struggling with the heavy bag of worries. And to those of you listening, if you've not read or seen The Huge Bag of Worries, please do go and have a look at it. You can buy the book, which would make Virginia very happy. Or you can also, there are read versions of it on YouTube as well that you can listen to as well. So...

Virginia Ironside 26:11
Well, this is when Jenny is approached by the old lady who is about the only person who sees the bag of worries, sitting beside her and almost pushing her off the wall. And the old lady says, Can't we open up the bag of worries and see what's in it? And Jenny said no, no, no. absolutely terrifying. Nonsense said the old lady firmly, there's nothing a worry hates more than being seen. If you have any worries, however small, the secret is to let them out slowly, one by one and show them to someone else. They will soon go away.

Peter Leonard 26:52
Perfect. Thank you. I love that bit so much. There's so much in that one paragraph.

Virginia Ironside 26:58
And then the illustrations are so good the way they the minute they come out into the air. They pop or scamper off to their rightful owner.

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Peter Leonard 27:06
And then there's a wonderful minute where she blows a kiss to some of them and they float away.

Virginia Ironside 27:10
Yeah.

Peter Leonard 27:10
Do you still have a bag of worries?

Virginia Ironside 27:13
Yeah, I think so. Yes. But the zip is so tight on it that I can't.... I find it very hard to even think about opening them. But they're there, yes.

Peter Leonard 27:28
Yeah, I think I think that's common in the two of us.

Virginia Ironside 27:30
Do you have that?

Peter Leonard 27:30
Oh, absolutely.

Virginia Ironside 27:31
Yes.

Peter Leonard 27:31
Yeah, I do. And I think I'm much better now at opening them and getting them out. There are still some tucked right in the corner of the bag that I haven't got out yet.

Virginia Ironside 27:41
No

Peter Leonard 27:41
But I think I'm becoming better at pulling them out.

Virginia Ironside 27:44
Yes, good.

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Peter Leonard 27:45
And sometimes I'm the only one who needs to see them. And that then deals with it. And other times, I need to show someone else.

Virginia Ironside 27:52
That's a very good point. Sometimes you don't need to show them to other people.

Peter Leonard 27:56
You just need to look at them yourself. And that can be sufficient. Virginia, it's been such a joy talking to you.

Virginia Ironside 28:02
Oh it's been lovely talking to you, Peter.

Peter Leonard 28:05
If I had more time, I'd get you to read the whole book to me because I could just, I would just enjoy that so much. Thank you for sharing so openly so much of your journey, your life with us and for sharing your tips. I think that you know that idea of, you know, getting the worries out, asking questions, and making sure that you're not carrying someone else's worries are really helpful things. For some of us, we may know those things, but it's so easy to forget them.

Virginia Ironside 28:29
I know...

Peter Leonard 28:29
And just being reminded that actually just checking in with these things is a really powerful thing. So all of those are going into our emotional toolkit, and we're going to pull them out when we need them.

Virginia Ironside 28:38
I'm so pleased, thank you so much.

Peter Leonard 28:40
Thank you so much.

Virginia Ironside 28:40
Well, it's been a treat talking to you. Thank you.

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Peter Leonard 28:43
Good thank you.

Narrator (Heather) 28:48
Emotionally Speaking is presented by Peter Leonard. Peter is the Chief Executive of The Centre for Emotional Health, and you can find out about their work and training courses by visiting their current website. Family links.org.uk. Emotionally Speaking is produced by Freya Hellyer and Alexandra Quinn and is brought to you by the team at Loftus Media.

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