

finding the Words

Empowering Struggling Students
through Guided Conversations



DR. HAYLEY WATSON

Clinical Psychologist & Founder of Open Parachute

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Praise for *Finding the Words*

“Avoiding theory and jargon, Dr. Hayley Watson’s *Finding the Words* is a hands-on resource for teachers and other caring adults who hope to address young people’s mental health issues proactively, responsively, and responsibly. From her deep experience as a clinical psychologist, Dr. Watson presents a practical framework for understanding common problems young people are facing—and then illustrates it with sample conversations that offer constructive strategies to support young people in overcoming these obstacles. Using highly accessible language, she encourages us to act on everyday opportunities to have a positive impact on young people who are experiencing mental health challenges.”

—**Sheldon Berman, Ed.D.**,

*Lead Superintendent for Social-Emotional Learning, AASA,
The School Superintendents Association*

“*Finding the Words* serves as a trusted colleague for educators, offering guidance and examples crucial for supporting students in their moments of struggle. This reliable companion empowers educators to authentically connect with students, equipping them with the words needed to navigate challenging situations and foster meaningful understanding.”

—**Liz Hill, M.Ed.**,

Assistant Superintendent, West Vancouver Schools, Canada

“Dr. Watson’s kind and open heart in the pages of this educator’s guide make it possible to reach and connect with students and heal ourselves. Having strength, courage, and knowledge in all our approaches even when challenged by a student’s behavior is our own healing. Always leading with the heart, Dr. Watson makes us stronger and wiser through practical and accessible guidance. In this guide, educators can find comfort in knowing that there are answers to hard questions as they navigate challenges with students as we learn and grow together.”

—**Maura Papile, L.I.C.S.W.**,

Senior Director of Student Support Services, Quincy Public Schools

“The book beautifully encapsulates the idea that as educators, our role goes far beyond imparting knowledge; we are also responsible for nurturing the emotional well-being of our students. Dr. Watson highlights the crucial steps in self-reflection that can help students confront their inner needs and find their true selves. By making space for this self-discovery, educators can profoundly impact a student’s personal growth. Every educator or supporter of education can benefit from this book.”

—**Scott Fraunheim**,

President and Chief Executive Officer, Distinctive Schools

“*Finding the Words* is more than just a book—it’s a call to action, empowering educators to engage in transformative conversations with young people facing significant challenges in their lives. Dr. Watson skillfully uses real-life scenarios to demonstrate the application of a six-part process designed to boost mental health resilience among youth. At the heart of this approach is the value placed on deep, meaningful conversations between young people and supportive adults, providing the context for nurturing the insights and skills youths need to help them navigate adversity.”

—**Jenny Williams,**

Educational Consultant and Developer of <http://wellbeingbc.ca>

“I have known Dr. Hayley Watson for many years and have seen firsthand the work she delivers into the school system for both students and educators through the Open Parachute program.

Dr. Hayley has a deep, authentic passion for helping students’ mental health journey and for educators to be equipped with the tools to help do and say the right thing in the moment. I believe this book will be the toolkit educators need to help students navigate some of their most challenging years of mental health. Dr. Hayley’s wisdom, intellect, and genuine care for humans comes through in the words of this book. She breaks down the seemingly overwhelming subject of mental health and gives educators the confidence and the language to meet students where they are at. It gives constructive and practical examples of real-life interviews with students for teachers to draw on to prepare for tough conversations.

I believe that this book will be a game-changer for educators, who are often the first point of call for students when they are suffering. I recommend the work and balanced views of Dr. Hayley, and I’m excited for this book to go out into the world and help people.”

—**Jules Sebastian**

Founder of The Sebastian Foundation

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This book is dedicated to every incredible child and teenager I had the pleasure of interviewing over the past few years, whose words form the core of this book. I am consistently in awe of your wisdom, courage, and resilience. Speaking to you gives me such hope for the future, and I know that with your voices leading the way, beautiful things will happen in our world. Thank you for being a hero in your own life and allowing that heroism to be used as guidance for others.

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Acknowledgments

One of my own mental health patterns is assuming that I need to do everything on my own and that I can, in fact, do things all by myself. This comes from my own childhood experience of feeling like the world was a scary place and reacting to that fear by trying to control my reality. The good news is that even with this shadow quality rearing its head my whole life, I have been constantly surrounded by people who have loved me, made me feel safe, given me clarity, reminded me of my own courage, and helped me form my own identity. Many of these people also helped me to write this book, and it truly would not have been possible without them. Bridget Kamp, my partner in crime since we were 4, you provided an educator's lens that was invaluable in clarifying my language. Tom Pastro, my partner in life and in business, you always make me and everything I do better with your (sometimes infuriatingly accurate) insights and insanely brilliant mind. Sanna Purinton, my teacher and guide, you heighten my perspective so that I can see the whole world in a single moment every time we speak. Christina Lawson, your tireless and endlessly efficient efforts in collating all of these interviews made the writing of this book feel seamless. Simon Bowen, your ability to tease out my (often chaotic) thoughts into concise and understandable frameworks gave this book shape. The rest of our incredible team at Open Parachute, you provided insights and ideas at just the right time and kept the life raft moving forward in so many important ways, which gave me the space I needed to put these words onto the page.

Finally, Thalassa Tam, your fabulous designs brought my ideas to life, and Anyese Khamis, your beautiful artwork captured the essence of conversations with young people, who are our true teachers.

Introduction

This book is unique in its approach. It is not a book about theories or analysis, it is a practical how-to handbook. It will provide you with guided conversations based on interviews with real students so that you can learn the specific language that will help you respond to the challenges your students face.

Mental health can be an overwhelming topic for educators. You hear the terrifying statistics. You know your students are struggling now more than ever. Mostly you might feel confident in your ability to help because you know your students and you're good at what you do. But right now, youth are in a mental health crisis, and sometimes you might get stuck when things are heavy or intense or on a scale you haven't yet experienced. Sometimes it's hard to know when to refer your students to a mental health professional and what you can say in those moments when there is no one else there but you.

This learning is essential for every educator, even if you don't want to speak about mental health at all with your students (which is completely understandable!). Think of it like CPR training. We aren't doctors, we don't know how to do surgery, but we all go through the training so that in the event that we are in front of someone whose heart has stopped, we can keep them alive until help arrives.

One of the hardest things about being an educator is that you are always "on." When you encounter student struggles and mental health challenges, it is on the fly, in the moment, and you often don't have the luxury of providing much more than a few words. Feeling on the spot with a student's reality and not being quite sure what you should or shouldn't say can be a stressful and challenging experience. This is part of what is leading to so much teacher burnout.

Being an educator, you are immersed in human connection, and the messiness this entails, and you are the first to see the ever-changing landscape of challenges that young people face. Even though you might not feel equipped to deal with some of the things your students are experiencing, you are. You care, and you want to help. Those are the fundamentals. You don't

need to be a psychologist or a mental health “expert.” All you need is a source of practical guidance that you can use to build on your already strong foundation to provide support for your students while also supporting yourself.

This book is that source. You can use the index to flip to any challenge you see occurring for your students, and in a matter of minutes, you will have an example of dialogue and language that you can draw on. This will help you move from your already strong foundation of connecting to and caring for your students to knowing precisely what to do in order to provide deep and meaningful mental health support. To provide the kind of support that builds resilience in students so they are more equipped to help themselves, and that creates a healthy boundary for you at the same time. When you know your words are helping, you are less likely to take the burden of what you hear in the classroom home with you, creating less stress in your life. These impactful conversations with struggling students will mean that you have more time, headspace, and energy to focus on teaching. And more specifically, teaching students who are mentally and emotionally ready to learn.

The information found in this book is based on my education in this field, which includes five academic degrees, my Ph.D. research into school bullying interventions, and my work as a clinical psychologist. But more than any of that, the greatest insights I have gained to advise my theoretical perspective are based on two things: First, my own therapeutic processing of the trauma that I faced in my early life, which allowed me to develop a deeply personal understanding of the theories I was presented with throughout my educational journey. By seeing my own patterns, changing some, and struggling to change others, I have become acutely aware of how our thoughts and feelings play out in the way we treat ourselves and each other on a daily basis. And second, the work I have done with schools and students over the past 20 years—some as a psychologist, some as a program developer, and some as a mentor and youth worker. Doing this work has given me a deep insight into the way mental health plays out in the real world, in school settings. The mental health challenges that educators are presented with are often confusing and multilayered, and there is usually a deficit of time to deal with the challenges of so many students in the midst of a busy school day. This is what led me to develop Open Parachute, which is a Tier 1 mental health curriculum program to assist teachers in delivering impactful mental health lessons to all of their students without needing to be a mental health “expert” themselves. Many of the teachers delivering these lessons all over the world have asked me a similar question: “If something comes up in class, what *exactly* do I say?” This book is an answer to that question, and is for all the brilliant educators out there who tirelessly (and often thanklessly) do the hard work every day to connect to and care for their students. In these pages, I hope you find the words that can help you navigate the challenges you face in your classroom every day.

What Is Really Going on with Students?

Every child is born with the wisdom to flourish. Every person inherently knows what they need to thrive. If they didn't, we wouldn't have survived so effectively as a species. And yet in today's world, many youth are struggling for a growing list of reasons. Many families face challenges that are beyond their control, and in many homes, the isolation and sudden changes of COVID exacerbated these challenges. Most students are in consistent contact with technology, and this can overwhelm and overstimulate them. While social media serves as a powerful tool for connection, it also increases many students' experiences of loneliness and decreases their self-esteem. With more and more image editing, increasing numbers of students feel ashamed of their bodies, which further diminishes their sense of self. Any student who does not quite fit in with their peers begins to see themselves as "less than," which impacts their agency and motivation to strive. There are so many ever-changing challenges that children and teenagers face in our world right now that it has become an impossible task for parents to protect them or prepare them adequately.

While this can all feel pretty bleak and disheartening, the good news is that there actually is something that we, as adults, can do to help. No, we don't have all the answers. No, we can't make their challenges go away. But what we can do is remind them that *they have everything they need to find their way to the other side of whatever they are facing*. It might not be easy, and it might take time, but they *can* learn to reflect on and understand their own experiences, and do things to actively build their support systems and support themselves. These steps will drastically improve any student's mental health, and these are things that we can coach and encourage them to do every single day.

Humans have the capacity to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. This has been proven time and time again. When faced with struggle, we have the incredible ability to shift, change, and adapt to achieve greatness that we never would have imagined. When faced with 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela cultivated the courage and open-heartedness to lead an entire nation to a peaceful revolution. When faced with starvation and isolation, Anne Frank found the wisdom to write words that would teach profound compassion to the world for generations to come. When brutally gunned down, Malala Yousafzai found the strength to speak with such a commanding presence that she started an educational revolution that gave millions of girls the opportunity to expand their minds. Each of these incredible people changed the course of history simply by *facing a personal challenge*. As they struggled, they dug deep within themselves, and in so doing, found their own unique brilliance that could help not only themselves, but the world around them.

Every one of us has within themselves that brilliance and power. We just don't always know how to access it.

And so instead of expanding to our fullest potential when we face adversity, many of us simply fall into despair and get caught up in our fears. We start to self-destruct. We are so lost in our reactions that we become disconnected from our natural internal motivation to thrive. This is what separates us from animals. Our incredible mind has the ability to make something out of nothing. So when we are connected to ourselves and the world around us, we can be courageous and compassionate beyond measure, inspiring the world to do what is right and good and fair for everyone. But when our mind is spinning away from us and we no longer have a grasp on who we are or what we're capable of, all that mental power becomes focused on *escaping what we're feeling*. At all costs.

In the classroom, this might look like daydreaming, persistent disruptive behavior, withdrawal, nonattendance, or overly dramatic responses. All of this flags a deeper issue that this student is facing.

Imagine walking along a mountain path that's clearly marked, so every time you come to a crossroads you can see an indication of the right direction to take. Maybe it takes you a while to find the correct markings, and you might start down the wrong path and have to turn back a few times, and sometimes the right path is steep and rocky. But because you know where you are going and what to look for, you eventually find your way to the top of the mountain. This is what life is like for a mind that is in tune with itself, and able to devote its full attention to the task at hand—climbing whatever mountain is in front of us.

But let's consider the alternative. Imagine that you are on that same path, but this time you are looking at your phone because your friends are messaging you conflicting opinions about where you should be going. And you are also looking at social media accounts of famous people who have rapidly leaped over mountains much bigger than this, so you're wondering where the elevator is. And at the same time, you're searching online for what the "experts" say is the correct path to take. But these experts all seem to be fighting over different sources of evidence, and accusing each other of misinformation. Your mind is preoccupied and overwhelmed. You don't even bother looking up and *trying to find your own way*. All you can think of is getting off this mountain and back into your comfy bed because the whole journey has become way too overwhelming.

When a student is in this state, you might see them becoming engrossed in social media or video games, sleeping in and missing deadlines, or focusing more on their friendship dramas than on self-care or even basic hygiene. All of these are avoidance tactics (usually unconscious) that indicate these students are overwhelmed with their reality and are trying to retreat to situations and experiences that feel safer, more familiar, and easier to resolve.

So you take the first path that leads downhill to simply get *away*, and you follow it even though you're now walking through swamplands, being bitten by bugs and getting scratched by the underbrush. You become distracted by all these new challenges. You forget that there is still a mountain that you can climb to completely change your reality, circumstances, and perspective, and you continue to go farther and farther downhill. Your desire to escape the confusion and challenge of the mountain overpowers your wisdom and trust in yourself to reach the peak. Every time you come to a new crossroad, it becomes harder and harder to take the upward path. You are less and less able to see the markings that can lead you to the summit because you are more and more fixated on the desire to get back to something you know, that feels safe. The deeper you go, the more turned around you become and the less perspective you have. It starts to feel like everything you do is hopeless and nothing is going to bring you back home.

And therein lies the problem. Our mental health suffers when we *stop looking for our own path* and trusting our own ability to find our way through adversity. We become focused on trying to find *safety* (avoiding the challenge) instead of *expanding to become a new version of ourselves that can overcome this challenge*.

This is why you might see many students lacking what we call a “growth mindset,” who give up easily or who don't want to keep working at something until they master it. The more students avoid their uncomfortable thoughts and feelings about the challenges in their lives (by seeking comfort through their phone or other distractions), the more they develop a pattern of shutting down anytime a difficult feeling arises (such as feelings of failure, disappointment, or inadequacy, which are all a natural part of learning).

How Can I Help?

All of this is preventable. If students just knew that they could turn around and face their mountain. If they realized that they have all the answers within them, and that all they have to do is direct their attention in the right place, toward *overcoming the obstacles they face, instead of seeking a way to avoid them.*

We can't create a world for youth where they don't struggle. That's life. But we *can give them hope.* We can remind them of their strength. We can walk beside them so they know they're not alone, and remind them to look up and take in the glorious view of how far they have come, so their joy sparks new energy and a strengthened will to climb higher.

Change is hard. It's scary and often painful. And we live in a world that hides away from discomfort. So as the world constantly, rapidly, and drastically changes around us, most of us are not changing along with it. We are not adapting and thriving. We are freaking out. And so are our youth. Many children and teenagers are terrified, overwhelmed, depressed, anxious, and confused because they don't see a path to new heights, only a mad dash away from an increasing number of obstacles.

But students don't need to be in this state. They have the ability to create beauty in this new world. They can find joy. They can live up to their fullest potential, not in spite of the challenges they face, but because of them. Each mountain in front of them presents an opportunity to discover more of their own ability to thrive, and along with it the confidence to know they can go further, and do greater things in the world.

And we can help them do it.

You, as an educator, are in the uniquely perfect position to give your students this gift. You are connected to them every day, and they know how much you care for them. You have the perspective to see their patterns play out in their daily struggles of being "out in the world" (at school) in a way that their parents don't have access to. And you also have the ability to nudge them in the right direction every single day.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to help you understand how to respond to students facing all different types of challenges. It will give you the language to support, encourage, and draw out the wisdom of your students so that you can maximize the impact you have, not only on the knowledge your students retain in class, but also on the people they become and the positive impacts they have on the world.

In these pages, you will hear from real youth expressing their deepest challenges and their greatest courage, strength, and resilience. Through their stories, you will learn how to help every young person you come in contact with find the same resources within them to

overcome whatever challenges they face, and truly flourish throughout their lives. You will learn tools for helping students overcome specific experiences that impact their mental health, like bullying, addictive patterns, low body image, violations of consent, prejudice, and stress. The goal of this book is to give you the confidence to create meaningful change in the next generation every single day.

Sometimes you will have a student confide in you. Sometimes will find something out from a parent or counselor and are asked not to address it with the student directly for privacy reasons. For the most part, the conversations in this book are about *building skills* and can be used whether you can talk openly about a student's specific challenges or not.

With some students, it takes prolonged effort, multiple points of contact, and constant availability for them to feel safe enough to make changes that can help their mental health. Many students will display behavior that is rude, cruel, disrespectful, or it might seem like they don't care about anything. This is one of the biggest challenges as an educator, and it's incredibly difficult not to take these actions personally. But breakthroughs do happen, often when we least expect it, and simply reminding students again and again that you are here to help them will have a bigger impact than you will ever know.

As a clinical psychologist, I speak to students about their challenges regularly, so my comfort level with these topics is naturally higher than it would be without this experience. Therefore, I usually ask direct questions because I am very familiar with the types of answers I will get. You might feel comfortable having these frank conversations already, or this might seem foreign to you. Either way, the more conversations you have, the easier it gets. So be gentle with yourself and move at your own pace, knowing that any level of interest you show students about their mental health and well-being will go an incredibly long way to helping them feel safer to open up to the people in their lives who can help them when they need it most.

Thank you for listening to these brilliant young heroes. As we help them, we are also helping ourselves. Their voices will lead us all to the bright, peaceful, exciting new future that we so very much deserve.

The chapters do not need to be read in order, and you can read any chapter or group of chapters without reading anything that comes before it. I encourage you to start by thinking of a student you know is struggling, find that struggle in the index, and go to that section in the book. Use the guided conversation as a model for when you next have the opportunity to speak with this student.

Keep the book in your classroom, and grab it at the end of each day if you have any questions about your students, if there are any interactions that aren't sitting well with you, or if you find your students' behavior requires constant consequences, and nothing seems to "work." You can open the book and flip to the section that relates most to what is happening with that student. See if you can picture your own student while you read through the conversation in the

chapter. Then try the language and see what happens. This book is designed to be used again and again to give you practical, usable guidance that transforms your already strong foundation of connection with your students into something that you can be confident is deeply supporting their mental health.

The more you use it, the more the pieces will fit together, and this language will become more and more natural and spontaneous. Think of this book as your psychologist friend. Someone you can call up anytime and say “My student is struggling with x . What can I say to them in the context of a classroom that will help?”

There are three additional Bonus Chapters that can be found at www.openparachuteschools.com/finding-the-words covering topic areas that are more specialized in nature (“Helping Students Who Are Overwhelmed or Having a Panic Attack”; “Coaching Students with Obsessive/Perfectionistic Thoughts”; “Coaching Students Away from Gang Culture”). If your students are facing these specific challenges, the bonus chapters will also be helpful for you to draw on.

When you have more time, you can read through Chapter 1, “Understanding Student Mental Health,” to get a broad overview of why these conversations are so effective. The theory presented here is intentionally brief and is provided only *in service of the practical conversation guides*, not the other way around. This is a bottom-up approach that is grounded in evidence but presented in a format that *means* something to you as an educator. You probably don’t really want your psychologist friend to give you a long-winded analysis of your student’s concerns. You know them; you see them. You sometimes don’t understand exactly what’s going on, but you always want to help. You just want some practical guidance so you can have organic conversations with your students that you are confident will help them.

After Chapter 1, there are five sections to the book, each exploring different ways that student challenges manifest (see Figure 1.1 in Chapter 1). At the beginning of each section is a chapter that will help you understand these issues from a psychological perspective and explore the specific, structured steps you can take in conversations that will help your students thrive. You will notice some overlap between the sections, and this is because many of the issues that students face have multiple layers and can be looked at from many different angles. You will also notice that the same conversation steps apply to every student challenge, and as you read through the sections, you will see different ways that these steps can manifest, depending on the

student and the circumstances. Looking for *similarities* will help you in applying this in your own communication with students.

The chapters within each section will then explore one specific challenge in more depth, with a breakdown of:

1. **Why** the challenge is happening (from a psychological perspective).
2. **What** you can do to help (applying the structured steps laid out in the first chapter of the section).
3. **How** you will do this (hearing directly from students, based on real transcripts of my 300+ interviews with youth aged 5–19 across the United States, Canada, and Australia over the past four years, interviews that form the basis of the Open Parachute school mental health program).

At the end of each chapter, you will see a “Related Chapters” section. This shows you chapters that could be similar in the types of issues that students are facing or the types of reactions they are having. You can use these suggestions to guide your process of flipping through the book instead of reading each section in the order it appears in the book if that seems more intuitive to you.

Each interview shows additional commentary to provide context about why I responded the way I did, what I was feeling, or a different response that could have been more appropriate. This is designed to help you digest and understand these conversations and identify things that resonate with you or that you would do differently, depending on your personality, personal history, and relationship with your students. I recommend reading each interview without these comments first so the flow of the discussion is uninterrupted, and then reading it again with the commentary so you can reflect on how you would apply the conversation yourself. It’s also important to note for context that these interviews were all done with students that I did not know previously, and I interviewed each student once for about an hour (after first speaking briefly on the phone with them, their parent, and sometimes their school counselor). In the interviews, they were speaking on camera about their challenges, so that other students who participate in our Open Parachute mental health curriculum program can hear authentic accounts from real peers to encourage their own mental health skill-building.