



## Connecting in isolating times: A conversation with Dr. Georges Sabongui PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Interviewer: Jill Morgan

Guest: Dr. Georges Sabongui

*Jill Morgan: Hello everyone. My name is Jill Morgan. Well, we're going through an unprecedented time, and you might be starting to think this word unprecedented is getting to be a little tired. We've heard it so many times, but it is so accurate when you think of how our lives have changed in such a big way over the last few months. We are dealing with stresses in our life and disruptions in our schedules, that we never ever experienced before and so it's really important now more than ever that we look after our mental health. So I'm really pleased to be joined today by Dr. Georges Sabongui. Hi, Dr. Georges.*

*Dr. Georges is a psychologist and stress expert. He's going to help us dig a little bit deeper into what makes us feel the way we do and how we can stay afloat when sometimes it feels like everything is a bit uncertain.*

*Dr. Georges, I've heard you speak before about when we have expectations that can sometimes lead to disappointment, and you might need to reset your expectations. Can you tell me a little bit more about what that means?*

**Dr. Georges Sabongui:** When people ask my opinion and they know that I'm a psychologist, they all sort of sneak off like, oh my god not another one of these flaky people who are going to fill our heads with fluffy ideas. But I was also Commander, Canadian Navy for 14 years, so I have a very pragmatic approach to life. I can share a couple of quick anecdotes:

So you know we should have all read Shakespeare. And "beware the Ides of March" was his Injunction, of course. On March 15th our world kind of fell apart. At 9 o'clock in the morning I woke up into the same world I had woken up to, you know, for the last 50 years or so, but by the time I walked out at noon it was a completely different world that I was walking into. I just kept receiving, you know, event cancellations. And everything that was cut and paste and predictable was just kind of falling apart. And instead of freaking out – well that's not true, I had ten minutes of freaking out, going what the heck is going on, and then I remembered something that I had learned way back in the Navy. One of things we used to do in the Navy when we were on operations is that we would assume that everything was chaotic and would fall apart. This is why you need great leadership and creativity and intelligence and adaptability. So I remembered this mantra that we used to have in the in the Navy, which was: I wonder what the unexpected thing that I should be expecting today is? And so when this happened on March 15<sup>th</sup> I just said, oh OK I guess this was the unexpected thing that I was expecting today.

Let's go back into our toolbox on how to reinvent ourselves and how to adapt to chaos, because the thin veneer of controllability and predictability was just violently ripped away. And in these moments, I try to remind myself that we are all standing on the

shoulders of giants. The hundreds of generations that have come before us for whom this was their normal life – unpredictability, uncontrollability, constant fear – worried about what's around the next corner. We have this wisdom and knowledge of adaptation and survivability somewhere in our DNA. That would be what I would sort of say, is that you know this is kind of like the new normal. The new normal is that there is no normal. So we're just constantly adapting to changing information, changing situations and we kind of have to have faith that we have this capacity not only to overcome and adapt but actually thrive in this kind of environment.

**00:03:29**

*Jill: We certainly have become accustomed to the conveniences of modern life, unlike our ancestors who were building a life around survival. How do you tap into that strength that maybe our ancestors had a little more readily available than we do here in this life now, where things are usually pretty scheduled and a little bit more comfortable – maybe more so than we even realized until this happened?*

**Dr. Georges:** Yeah. Way more, and so I can share a couple of, sort of... You know, I sort of look for wisdom and genius wherever I can find it and you'd be surprised where it comes from sometimes. Our brains are actually perfectly designed to deal with this kind of thing. So we have a left brain, which is very logical, analytical, you know. We live in a very left-brained, rational world. But we also have a right brain, which is the creative brain that really flourishes in this kind of environment. So to give you an example of the left brain, right brain. Left brain is great for things that we can put on autopilot. I have autopilot in my car and it's great when the roads are sunny and the lines are clear on the road. But you know what? I live in Quebec. The roads suck and it's always snowing. It was snowing again this morning. And so very quickly, when I'm on autopilot, the car starts freaking out and, you know, buzzers going, everything going. You need to take manual control right away because I have no clue where I'm supposed to be driving. And this is kind of like what we're doing with our lives right now, you know. We were so happy on autopilot, cruise control. We were, you know, all these little problems that we could just sort of hide under a thin veneer of "life is good." And you know, anyways, I'm just a little too tired and too busy to deal with any little cracks in my life. Well, all of a sudden now all we have in our lives are cracks, but these cracks were already there whether these are emotional cracks or vulnerabilities. Whether there are vulnerabilities in our relationships and our finances, in our professional resilience – whatever area of our life had little cracks in it before, well now these cracks are kind of shattering wide open. But we have a whole neural circuitry in the right brain that really flourishes.

You know, kids are very right-brain oriented and they're always inventing stuff and you know, they're always creating stuff. For whatever crazy reason my kids decided to go camping in the backyard yesterday. It was freezing last night! I was just thinking to myself, now if I was the one who had come up with this idea and said, OK kids, we're all going to go camping in the

backyard? They would have freaked out. No, it's too cold and we're hungry and we need to go pee and we're scared to go outside. If it was my idea they would have done everything to sabotage it, but because it was their idea, it came from their creative whatever, their creative fertilizer that's growing in there, they did an amazing job. You know in chaos when we don't have this cut-and-paste, perfectly routine life, all of a sudden there's space for people to really amaze us. And I think that what comes out is what's already inside, so people who were already stressed and nervous and anxious are now feeling this exponentially. But people who were already orienting their lives towards looking for a way to have a positive impact on others, I feel that the situation has just really, really brought out the best in people and the best in communities. And every day, I'm overwhelmed with like beautiful stories of how individuals and communities are coming together to make a real positive impact and help each other through.

So one of the little things that I could share for the leaders out there who were having to make really, really tough decisions ... I was talking to one of my clients who happens to be a manager in her company and she had to cut 30 percent of her budget. So she lost a couple of nights' sleep and she didn't know what to do, and so she just got her whole team together. She said, "Listen, I have to make the toughest decision of my professional life and I don't know what to do. We can lay off 30 percent of the workers, or we can all take a 30 percent pay cut. It's just too big a decision for me to make on my own, so I'm really going to need your help on this one." And the entire company decided, they voted to take a 30 percent pay cut in order to be able to keep everybody on the payroll. And we're all going to sort of tighten our belts a little bit but nobody is going to be left out in the cold. So these kind of brilliant creative solutions to problems actually help us get closer together. This is the chance for us to shine and be leaders. So the left brain, the rational part, can't come up with these kind of solutions and left brain just wants us to stay in our comfort zone and wants us to contract and hide in fear. But the right brain loves these opportunities. So we're sort of stuck. Part of us wants to just go back to our old life as quickly as possible and find our comfort zone. And this other part of us is like, Well now that things are falling apart, I wonder if this breakdown can actually lead to some kind of breakthrough and help me reinvent myself and my life in a way that's more meaningful in some ways.

**00:08:25**

*Jill: I read somewhere that someone had said we're all in the same storm but we're in different boats. So the experience in a storm can be so different and so for those people that maybe don't thrive as much in chaos, how do they tap into some of that strength that they might see in other people doing better? It almost makes you feel worse if you're not rising to the occasion the way someone else is.*

**Dr. Georges:** My kids have discovered this new TV show on Netflix called You vs. Wild and it's a fun day. The same guy, Bear Grylls, seems to make a show for adults called Man vs. Wild. And so he's an ex-British soldier who goes on these, like, survival missions. And so in the kid version it's awesome because they get to do these missions with this ex-British Special Forces tough guy. And by the magic of interactive technology, they actually get to choose the direction the missions are going to take. So in one of the episodes I was watching with the kids he comes to a critical decision in the middle of the mission. You know, he's cold and tired and

hungry, and he looks at the camera. He says to the kids, Listen, we got to eat something. We've got to get some calories in here just to be able to keep going. So I found these larva, these worms, and I could eat these. And I also found these mushrooms. So what should I do? I know it's gross, but kids love this. So of course the kids by the magic of interactive TV they choose to eat the larva, and here's the ... here's the beauty of it. So he looks at the camera says, OK I know you want to eat larva, but I got to tell you I'm really scared right now and I don't know what's going to happen, and my stomach's kind of churning and my heart is beating 100 miles an hour and I'm really nervous. But it's going to give us the strength to go on. I have to do this. So then he eats the worms. And I thought it was such a beautiful message to send kids, you know. I grew up where, you know, you've got to be tough and suck it up. And suppress and ignore emotions was probably the main recipe for dealing with how we're feeling. But I think we're living in a new world where it's OK to not be OK and it's by actually knowing that we're vulnerable and not OK that we're actually going to be strong. Because there's some days where I'm going to need to lean on you because I'm having a bad day, and there's some days you're going to need to lean on me because you're having a bad day. But it's this whole illusion that we have to try to get through this on our own and be tough and not affected that makes us very vulnerable. A little later on in the same episode, you know, night is falling and he looks at the camera he says, OK kids listen, we're in the forest and night is coming, so we're going to have to find a refuge for the night. And I got to tell you we're going to make a campfire. There's a couple of reasons we're going to make a campfire. One is because at night, there's a lot of creatures that wake up to hunt and we don't want to be their supper. And, you know, it's going to get really cold so we need a fire to stay warm. But I'll tell you the most important reason for us to make a campfire tonight is because in the middle of the night, I'm going to be out here alone. It's going to be really dark. I'm going to be really scared and lonely, and I'm going to start to get really discouraged. So by making a campfire, you know, it's going to give us a little bit of hope because I'm going to look at the campfire and think about all the people who are counting on us that need us to be strong. And that's what's going to give us our strength. And I think we all are kind of feeling stuck in the forest, scared, lonely. It's dark and we don't know the way forward and we all need a kind of an emotional or psychological campfire. Whether it's our friends, our family, our faith, our community. Something that's that's bigger and stronger than us, that's going to give us the strength we need. But it's knowing that we're going to have those vulnerable moments that then we can take steps to make sure that we have our emotional and psychological campfire to take care of ourselves

**00:12:01**

*Jill: You mentioned the webinar that we had recently asked participants to share questions and that we would get to some of them in interviews so I wanted to touch base with you. One person had asked: When you see that someone is experiencing signs of depression, how do you approach someone to help, when often they're the last to see they're depressed? What's the advice you would offer to that person?*

**Dr. Georges:** So after some of my presentations and in live events, the two most common comments that I get: the first comment is, my husband should have been here and I don't know exactly what that means, but it is probably because husbands are the number one cause of stress. But the other the other most common question I get is, how do I get somebody to

get the help they need? And I thought about this for years and years and I remembered something that happened a couple of years ago. When I was doing my PhD, I shared a tiny little office – like less than cubicle sized – with a good friend of mine, Dr. Rick Miners out in Vancouver. I was doing my research on the military and resilience and post-traumatic stress and all that stuff. And Dr. Rick was doing his PhD on the benefits of meditation. So every day for five years I had to listen to this guy going, you know Georges, you really ought to meditate. You know, I just heard this awesome study and it's going to help you so much. Your soldiers would really benefit from this stuff. One day he invites me over for supper and I get to meet his wife, and so his wife says, So how do you like working with my husband? I said Yeah, I love the guy, man. He's ... he's amazing, but I gotta tell you he's driving me nuts with his stupid meditation stories and how I should meditate more. She says Yeah, yeah! He tells me the same thing all the time! How do you deal with it? I said, I know, he's driving me crazy man. You've got to give me some ideas. What did you do? And so she looked at me, she said, Well, I told him that I would start meditating when I saw that it made a difference in him. And I said, Oh yeah! You go girl! So I think about that experience when people say OK how do I get somebody to get the help they need? And that's my long-winded answer to that. Well maybe they'll realize that the help can be helpful if they see that it's made a difference in you. If they see that you're doing something to stay positive and resilient and being a positive influence on the people around you, and they're all going to say, kind of like that Sally Field movie, We all say, oh well – I'm going to have what she's having.

So when you see somebody who's doing well and smiling and having fun, well I don't know what they're having, but I want some of that! So yeah, self care and showing people that, hey listen, I also have days where I'm not OK and here's what I do about it. It's not by preaching and telling them, it's by showing them we're all kind of, a little bit miserable right now. And we don't need to add misery on top of the misery by being miserable about being miserable, by freaking out about stuff that hasn't happened before. Because what we're dealing with is already challenging enough. We don't need to make worst-case scenarios and freak out about stuff that hasn't happened before.

I think that life is beautiful and wonderful and full of rainbows, because I think that the default setting in life is probably one step up from unbearable suffering and misery. So any time that I see any glimmer of happiness and beauty and love and hope and wonder I just I grab this moment and I just try to squeeze as much positivity out of it. Because I know that these moments don't just happen randomly. Somebody put a lot of effort and energy and love into creating this positive experience for us. Whatever it is, some tiny little thing, you know. And so it's really important to recognize that wow, there are little miracles every single day that are happening that – if I'm only focusing on the negative stuff – I'm completely missing the point. And so in our kitchen we have this little Snoopy and Charlie Brown sitting on a on a dock. Charlie Brown turns to Snoopy and says, You know, Snoopy one day we're all going to die. And Snoopy says, Yep that's true, but on all the other days we're not. And so I think it's important to live as much as we can while we're living.

**00:16:19**

*Jill: Very wise words, Dr. Georges. One of the other questions that we had received during our webinar was a bit of a personal question and story so I'll just read it to you. You had been*

*talking about mirror Neurons, and as they applied to mothers and children and that bond that we can feel with our children and vice versa. And this person, though, offered this anecdote. She said, "My father passed away when I was a teenager. I don't know how to explain it but I felt a shiver going through my whole body then started crying without any reason. I just knew that something had happened to my father. An hour later my mother called to announce that my father had passed away at the exact time I felt it. A mirror neuron that I experienced with my father. "What do you think about that? Powerful stuff hey?*

**Dr. Georges:** Yeah, I'm kind of like choked up. That's a really beautiful story and I have to tell you something. We might not be as smart as we think we are. And I think that it's important to have room in our lives for wonder and magic and I'll give you a couple of quick insights on why I think that's so important. When you go see a magic show you know you don't want to be that boring guy. Oh, I saw where he put it. He hid it in his pocket. It's like yeah, we know it's a Trick, but let us let us enjoy the magic part. So I saw this interview, like a documentary, and they're interviewing the Nobel laureate in chemistry. So this guy is a Nobel-winning chemist and he won the Nobel Prize in chemistry for decoding the molecular code the trees use to actually create an internet in the forest. So the trees secrete a specific molecule out through the roots. This molecule then uses the roots of the mushrooms, the mycelium network, the mushroom roots, that spread out for kilometres and kilometres in the forest. And so the trees can actually use this molecule to hack the mycelium to send messages to other trees. It creates this like forest-wide internet, where trees are talking to each other. The molecules that he discovered and was able to decode is Dimethyltryptamine, and it's DMT. And so they introduce – like this is like brilliant amazing stuff, but how does it work? And he just looks and says, But it's magic, obviously. Actually yes, it is magic. Like it's completely mind-blowing that the forest uses some kind of forest internet to communicate to each other and it's amazing that a cell knows exactly how to create a baby. And it's like there's so much magic around us, that if you just use science to explain it away and oh, I know how this trick is done. It's like, Yeah but you kind of need some magic in your life. And so when we're talking about mirror neurons, I think that it's magic. I don't know how to explain it and I want to believe in magic just because it makes life a little more interesting. You know if you would have told scientists 100 years ago that humans create an electromagnetic field, they would've thought you were a quack. Right? But we can measure that electromagnetic field now with electroencephalogram. So what kind of things are they going to discover in 100 or 200 years, that today we would think is just quackery or pseudoscience or whatever. That's my long-winded answer.

**00:19:37**

*Jill: Someone else on the mirror neuron topic had asked if mirror neurons are stronger for kids and then maybe they shut off more as we get older and maybe more cynical and less buy into the magic?*

**Dr. Georges:** Mirror neurons are stronger for children and women. So one of the popular theories in neuroscience right now is that a woman's nervous system isn't actually constructed for you. Your entire nervous system is constructed to be much more sensitive and attuned to the children. So women and children tend to co-regulate emotionally, and men tend to self-regulate. So I'll give you a stereotypical fight in a couple. The couple has a fight, the guy throws up his hands in exasperation. He says, That's it. I can't deal with this, I need to go for a walk.

And just before he walks into the garage to do whatever the heck guys do in the garage, the woman says, No, no, you can't walk out right now. We got ... we got to talk this out we got to, we've got to figure this out. You can't just leave me completely in turmoil like this. So basically what's happening is that the guy's emotional nervous system is so jacked up, this is, OK I can't deal with this I need to isolate myself and be alone so that I can self-regulate and self-soothe, calm my own nervous system. The woman says, no, no, no, you need to come here, reconnect with me, and we need to co-regulate our nervous systems together. So that's what women are doing for children. They're co-regulating. Children don't have the ability to self-soothe and self-regulate the nervous system. So what they need is the emotional scaffolding. And by staying calm, and when the brain's synchronized, it's called entrainment. And so when the brain starts to synchronize and entrain, then we're contaminating each other. Usually that's by offering scaffolding as an emotional safe place and helping people co-regulate. But sometimes we're in the presence of people that just naturally are always stressed and nervous and just being around them sort of gets us uncomfortable.

So women and children tend to co-regulate and use their mirror neurons more. Men tend to isolate and self-regulate. It's also one of the reasons that 120 years of stress research is wrong. I love finding out that a hundred years of scientific research is wrong. So about 10 or 15 years ago, there's a woman named Shelley Taylor from the University of California, Los Angeles, and she was doing a sort of like a historical retrospective of stress research. She said, You know when we're studying the impact of stress on the human body it's really hard to figure out the hormonal impact of stress on the female body, because you have your menstrual cycle that creates these hormonal modulations. So for 120 years, how did the scientists deal with this problem? Well it's simple. They just didn't study women, and then they come up with all these models of stress and resilience called the fight or flight response as being the default setting in the human body, and it turns out that's not true. Fight and flight is the default male setting for dealing with stress.

Women don't deal with stress by fighting or flighting, by going to the garage to self-regulate. Women tend to deal with stress by tending and befriending. So the male strategies tend to be isolationist and antisocial, and the female strategies are OK, I need to call my girlfriends up on the phone tell them that I'm having a lousy week and we need to whatever – have a Zoom dance party in the living room. We need to reconnect with each other. We need to leave the husbands at home with the kids and feed them Pizza Pockets while we go out and have a drink together or something, have a coffee with your girlfriend. So that pro-social activation of the social support network is actually much healthier. So tending and befriending versus fight or flight. So this is why women and children tend to co-regulate a lot more than men, who self-regulate.

**00:23:34**

*Jill: I would ask as a final wrap-up, Dr. Georges, for everybody who is navigating this COVID situation – and as we're going to continue to do in the months ahead things are always going to evolve and change – what are a couple of key takeaways that we can keep in our back pocket to try and be the best version of ourselves in all of this?*

**Dr. Georges:** So I'm going to give you a little bit of tough love. It's a choice when we reinvent ourselves. We're all in the process of being catapulted from the world that is known and comfortable. And I think that it's good for us to be catapulted into the world of the unknown and forced to really be grateful for the little things like, Gee you know I used to take toilet paper for granted and now I'm even grateful that we have enough toilet paper to last for the next couple of months! And all these little things that we take for granted. So, the choice to lean towards gratitude, magic, to stay away from the inclination to, you know, fight or flight, contract and fear and run. Look for our comfort zone. The other thing is to be really sensitive about how we affect each other. Those mirror neurons ... you know, I read a beautiful quote that says, you know, if you love life your children will love life.

And I'm reminded by this Italian movie, *La Vita e Bella* with Roberto Benigni and it's a ... it's a tragic comedy of this Italian family during World War II who gets put in a concentration camp. And the father works really hard to make sure that his son never realizes that they're in a concentration camp, so, creating beautiful magic moments every day for his son. And at the end of the war the son never realizes they were ever in a concentration camp. So create magic moments for your friends, for your family. Be a leader. People are looking to you. Instead of worrying about how you can get somebody the help they need, be that sort of beacon of light and hope and positivity and you will already be offering a lot more than most people. But that's a choice. So it's really a conscious choice. Am I going to let the situation bring out the worst in me? That's easy. You don't need a shrink to teach you how to do that. Or am I going to consciously choose to dig deep and find the best in me – and make sure that that's what emerges in all this – and find ways to create magic and memorable moments for my friends, my family, my community and create my little, campfire that's going to keep me warm on the cold dark nights in the forest.

**00:26:04**

*Jill: We all need a campfire to keep us warm in those dark moments. So many wise words. Thank you so much, Dr. Georges. I know I have learned a ton, and I'm certainly leaving our conversation more inspired and ready to take on whatever comes next. Thank you so much for your time.*

**Dr. Georges:** Thank you, Jill.

Discover all the ways to learn at [FCC.ca/Knowledge](https://www.fcc.ca/Knowledge)

*Copyright 2020, Farm Credit Canada. This video information is intended for general purposes only; it is not intended to provide specific business advice and should not be relied upon as substitute for specific professional advice. The views expressed in this video are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of FCC. FCC makes no warranties or representations as to the accuracy, completeness, suitability, or validity of the information and shall not be liable or responsible to any person for any harm, loss or damage that may arise in connection with the use of this video. You may not reproduce this or any FCC video, in whole or in part, for the purposes of commercial distribution without the prior written permission of FCC.*