1. Using Presence for Greater Happiness

It may seem as though letting the mind wander can be a good thing - a momentary break from the daily grind. But, according to Dan Siegel, when mind-wandering is intentional and distracts people, it may make them unhappy. Presence, he says, is a way to prevent this.

**Dr. Siegel:** Presence actually leads to happiness.

When they do a path-analysis of the correlation of you being happy and you being present, they are able to determine, and it’s very clear, that it isn’t just that you’re happy so you’re present.

It’s that you’re present and that makes you happy.

The opposite of presence is something called mind-wandering, which we really want to distinguish from intentionality, which is, let’s say, resting by a lake or if you go to Martha’s Vineyard like you just did, resting by the ocean and saying, “I’m going to let my mind wonder and just relax.” That’s not called, in research terms, mind-wandering.

We should come up with a different name for that – that’s what we could call mind-freeing or something like that.
But when you’re mind-wandering – thinking about things that distract you from what you’re doing that are negative, or even if your mind-wandering is on positive things – both of those lead to unhappiness and they’re associated with lower levels of telomerase.

That’s really an amazing finding just in the last couple of years: to explore what it means to be present.

Presence is a mind process – it’s your subjective experience, in consciousness, of having attention stream energy and information flow into awareness. That’s what presence is.

Instead of thinking about what happened last week, or worrying about what I’m going to do tomorrow... I stay present.

I’m thinking about you, and I’m thinking about this helicopter flying overhead where I am right now and hoping everyone can hear us.

I stay present – so whatever happens, I still know that I’m here. I’m still aware of the helicopter – it’s staying distant – I’m relaxing and I’m aware of my physiology. All that would count as presence. (pp. 5-6 in your transcript)
2. The Five Traits of Mindfulness

Although many think of them as interchangeable, Dan Siegel argues that there are differences between presence and mindfulness. These five traits, he says, are part of what sets them apart.

**Dr. Siegel:** One trait is being aware of what’s happening as it’s happening.

In other words, if I take a shower, am I aware of the water on my body? Or am I thinking about going to Hawaii? There’s nothing wrong with being deep in thought about Hawaii, but it wouldn’t be taking a mindful shower.

The second one – and this is in any order – is non-judgmental. Of course, the brain is always making evaluations of things – it’s always judging.

Even though it’s easy to say non-judgmental, it’s probably better and more accurate to say that when judgments arise, you don’t take them so seriously – they arise and they go.

A third trait is being-with – what Baer and colleagues called, non-reactive.

And non-reactive doesn’t mean you’re dead – as if you’re a piece of cardboard. It means when you emotionally respond to something, you let yourself come back to baseline pretty readily.

Number four is a really fascinating one, and it’s why I say mindfulness is not the same as presence...
So far, all of these traits could go along with presence – they’re not contradictory. But this fourth one is really interesting.

This is the ability to name what’s going on inside of you. It’s the ability to describe, in words, the internal world. Now, that’s really interesting.

You can be present and have no words, right?

So this is the quality of being able to name it – when we get to the brain pretty soon, we can talk more about this later, but I’ll just say this now – I believe deeply that mindfulness is a very integrative process.

The final one, the fifth trait is present in everybody who is considered mindful.

These four were independent from each other, but this fifth one was only independent if people had been taught to meditate, which is really interesting because that’s the self-observation.

With this, we’re able to say, “There is a Dan here at this moment, engaged in this really fun, interesting discussion with Ruth.”

At the same time, the self-observation part of me is going, “I hope this is helpful for other people in whatever their work is – in hospitals, occupational therapy – all kinds of therapy – parenting, nursing, or in the work of being a physician – all of whatever we do.” That’s the observing part of me – that’s an observing
3. One Way to Slow the Dwindling of Telomerase in the Body

Telomerase is an enzyme in the body that keeps chromosomes strong and DNA healthy. Here, Dan Siegel suggests a way to keep telomerase levels high, and tells us who is most at risk for dangerously low levels.

Dr. Siegel: When they did studies of mind-wandering, which is the opposite of presence, they found that the lower your mind-wandering, the higher your presence and the higher your telomerase level. Now, that was a robust finding.

So what we hope to do in getting this finding out to people who are working in medicine, or working in (other therapies) is to show them that as stress increases, telomerase then decreases the length of the telomere. And we know that aging does the same thing.

We want to identify people who are at risk. For example, people taking care of individuals who are chronically ill – someone is just not recovering, and you’re faced with the emotional closeness of someone you care about –whether it’s a family member or someone related to your professional
work.

You want to make sure that you have the ability to stay present, and not have that (emotional closeness) become overwhelming. So, (decreasing stress) certainly avoids burn out, and literally, is also going to keep you younger.

We do know from studies of people who take care of individuals, let’s say with cystic fibrosis or Alzheimer’s disease that their telomeres are shorter and their telomerase is lower. That’s a known fact.

In the intervention studies now being done – they haven’t been published yet – we want to teach those individuals, in nursing, in medicine, in occupational therapy – in any kind of capacity of helping people who are in a very long term condition – we need to make sure that we take care of ourselves first.

The studies are going to look at (these issues): Can you reverse the whittling down of the telomeres? Can you prevent that from happening in the first place if someone is trained (in presence)?

Clinicians of any persuasion should really be given resilience training, which happens when you are taught to be present. Plus, the one way we know how to do that is through mindfulness training. (pp. 13-14 in your transcript)
4. Creating New Neural Pathways and Better Brain Integration

Brain integration is important for learning and thinking clearly, but sometimes it can slow down and become ineffective. Dan Siegel suggests that, with a simple technique, people can change their brains and make brain integration faster and more effective.

Dr. Siegel: The hope is to train people to intentionally create a mindful state, and over time, this state will become a trait.

Here’s the brain basis of that. The mind, and we can talk about how we handle that word, but with the mind – your focus of attention (and we’ll keep it very, very specific) – you stream energy and information flow in a concentrated way through specific circuits in the brain, so that patterns of neural firing are created.

Now, once you do that with regularity, as you repeatedly use attention to activate certain clusters of neural firing patterns...those patterns become reinforced literally with the activation of genes, the production of proteins, the strengthening of your synapses, and sometimes the growing of new neuron.

With time and with this skill, you develop a myelin sheath among inter-(connective circuits, so that not only the speed is a hundred times faster but the refractory period is 30 times shorter.
So we have $30 \times 100$ which is 3000 times quicker that you’re getting this pattern going, and that’s exciting.

But what is even more exciting is when you’re myelinated, the coordination and balance – the integration of the system – is much more effective.

You’re not only increasing speed, you’re increasing the integrative capacity of this larger system to work.

With all that being said, when you train the mind to focus awareness in a certain way, you’re getting the mind to get the brain to fire. That repeated firing – the firing at the moment – creates the state.

With the repeated firing – what we think is going to happen and there’s evidence to support it – is that the repeated firing creates the repeated state.

This increases synaptic connections through growing new synapses, reinforcing old ones, sometimes growing new neurons, and probably laying down myelin.

All this repeated firing might even make epigenetic changes, we don’t know – that’s going to be studied in the future. Methyl groups and histones can alter gene expression, and those are changed by experience too— we just haven’t studied that yet.

But in all these ways, what we’re hoping to show is that mindfulness training improves the integrative
capacity of the brain and this is my take on it. (pp. 15-16 in your transcript)

5. Using the "Wheel of Awareness" to Free the Mind

When people experience pain or illness they can become trapped in a pattern of undesirable emotions. Dan Siegel's "Wheel of Awareness" can help them overcome these emotions and move past the judgments that often accompany these situations.

Dr. Siegel: Based on my experience and training in mindfulness, mindfulness allows you to drop the energy curve from these points of probability and certainty to what I call an open plane of possibility where you relax old patterns – you let go of judgments.

You’re able to receive what’s happening as it’s happening from this open plane.

I just did an immersion weekend and yesterday, we talked about it. It was amazing to have these advanced students talk about how they applied this in a practical exercise called the Wheel of the Awareness.

This is where people can train the mind to drop these peaks of certainty that entrap you either in chronic pain or in psychological conditions that we
call psychiatric disorders.

To drop them down into this hub of the wheel from the rim was amazing. They all were recording what their own experience was with their clients and what their patients’ experiences were.

So, this is not something that’s just theoretical – it’s something that has a powerful foundation to it, and then you can have practical applications, too.

Even in the book, *The Whole-Brain Child*, we teach children to use the *Wheel of Awareness* practice that basically allows them to free their minds up and to be present. *(p. 20 in your transcript)*

**6. Internal Attunement - a Gateway to Presence**

According to Dan Siegel, there may be two selves - the experiencing self and the observing self. And often, the two compete with each other. But here he suggests a strategy for finding balance and becoming present.

**Dr. Siegel:** I think mindfulness is a way of having what we can call internal attunement.

The relationship between a parent and a child that promotes secure attachment is interpersonal attunement.
What they share in common is an attunement... For a parent, attunement means... if you are my daughter, Ruth, I’d be tuning into not just your behavior – I wouldn’t just be perceiving your behavior – I’d go beneath behavior to your internal world, and this is what I call Mindsight.

I would sense your feelings, your thought, your memories, your expectations, and I’d imagine what it’s like to be you.

Then I would be attuned to you. The studies are very clear.

But now, what is internal attunement with mindfulness?

I think, and I know this sounds weird, but I think it is an observing-self that is open and receptive to what’s actually going on as it’s going on in your sensing self – your experiencing self.

Now, I wrote that in *The Mindful Brain*, and I got a bunch of rolling eyes – as if to say, “There is no observing circuit. There’s only awareness.”

What was fascinating to me was that six months later, Norman Farb (University of Toronto) found these two independent circuits and found exactly this: they’re differentiated, and I think they get linked in mindfulness.

This is where the notion of internal attunement comes from... You do have an observing-self that could say, “You shouldn’t be talking to Ruth, Dan,
that’s not right. You should be out exercising and increasing your telomeres or whatever.”

My mind’s observing-self could be super harsh with my experiencing-self...

But if I’m really going to be mindful, I attune, and I say, “Look, it’s really great to talk to Ruth. You can exercise later. It’s all fine. Take a deep breath. Be present to what’s happening as it’s happening.”

That attunement is a gateway to presence. (*pp. 22-23 in your transcript*)

7. Training the Mind to Overcome Distraction

People can get frustrated and lose focus when their mind drifts during mindfulness practice. But Dan Siegel explains how to overcome this frustration and strengthen the mind.

**Dr. Siegel:** In many ways, the focus – if you’re doing mindfulness meditation – is to train the mind to detect when you’ve become distracted from what your intended focus is and to bring your attention back to the present moment, the target of your attention or – your chosen intentional one, like the breath, for example.

That training has been shown to make people happy. Even for people who have been doing this for 40 or 50 years, the mind always wanders.
It’s so important to get this message out – this is what we’re doing in our Research Center in UCLA.

We’ll tell people, “Look, it’s actually a moment to be kind to yourself when your mind wanders and you say I’m just human.”

Like a muscle, your mind gets distracted – that’s the relaxing of the muscle – and you redirect attention to the target, and in this case, it’s the breath and your mind gets strengthened.

That’s the only way you can really work out a muscle – let it get distracted and then redirect. (pp. 25-26 in your transcript)

8. Strategies for Resilience

According to Dan Siegel, certain people are at greater risk for lower levels of telomerase and unhealthy cells. Joan Borysenko gives two strategies that may slow, and even reverse this process.

**Dr. Borysenko**: Activity in the left prefrontal cortex of a resilient person has been found to be about thirty times greater than the activity in the left prefrontal cortex of someone who isn’t resilient.

So, there has been quite a bit of research on this – what another neurobiology researcher, Richie Davidson who is at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and does the nitty-gritty research calls “making a left shift.”
Essentially, mindfulness creates that left shift and, as a result, mindfulness is important for resilience.

One of the things I have found so wonderful when working with clients and teaching them different kinds of meditation, including mindfulness, is that it enhances one’s own practice as a therapist.

In a way, our clients are part of a larger sangha world, trying to learn the same thing.

Another kind of practice that can enhance resilience is the repetition of slogans. The repetition of slogans – there are fifty-nine Lojong slogans – is a part of Tibetan Buddhist practice.

There is also the Twelve-Step Program which includes a lot of slogans. What a slogan does is it reminds you of an entire teaching. Let’s say you are part of a Twelve-Step Program.

You are having an emotionally difficult time and you remind yourself, “Work it down. Don’t work it up.”

Or let’s say you are a student of the Course in Miracles and you are stuck in judgment. You say to yourself, “Would I rather be right or would I rather be happy?”

All of these increase resilience and they increase a shift of activity to the left prefrontal cortex.

I think it is so important that we recognize, both for ourselves and for our clients, the different kinds of activities that will work best. Some people may like slogans; some may like a meditation that is a
concentration meditation; some may prefer mindfulness meditation.

We’re learning more and more about what it is that gives us the brain signature of resilience. (pp. 8-9 in your TalkBack transcript)

9. Techniques for Cultivating Self-Integration

Self-integration can help people gain a better understanding of what they’re feeling, instead of shy away from it. Here, Ron Siegel explains techniques we can teach clients to help them cultivate a greater sense of self-integration and face problems head on.

Dr. Siegel: Developing integration allows us to re-own what we have split off or pushed away because it was too painful in the past. So, basically, all forms of psychotherapy are helpful for developing integration.

Within the mindfulness tradition, there are some practices that are quite helpful and they all have to do with appreciating, which we have also talked about during the series.

This is the idea of “no self.” It is a matter of seeing what arises in the heart and mind as basically impersonal events.

Let’s say anger comes up in me; it is the capacity to
notice, “Oh, anger’s arising.” It is the capacity to notice the muscles tightening up, the heart rate picking up in speed, and how thoughts of revenge are popping into the mind.

It is the capacity of noticing that this anger is just an event happening in the organism, as opposed to, “I am so angry I want to really get you back,” and being caught in that narrative.

When we get to the level of the body and just experiencing it as an unfolding series of events, we are able to integrate it better.

We don’t have to push it away as much. We are not as threatened by the feeling.

And this is not just with anger – it is memories, fears, longings, and sexual feelings – all of the feelings that have been painful for us.

Whenever we can open to painful feelings as impersonal events, then we can invite them back into the picture.

Another way to look at this and another way to approach this idea of ’no self’ – and we have talked about this before – is through seeing the multiplicity of selves.

This is the approach that Dick Schwartz has developed so nicely in Internal Family Systems – “There is a part of me that’s mad; there’s a part of me that’s sad; there’s a part of me that’s lonely.”

All of these feelings are part of us – we have many
different aspects to ourselves, and they each have an important role—we can invite them each to speak in some way.

Gestalt therapy, which I know you, Ruth, were steeped in that tradition—does a lot of this—allowing the different parts to speak.

All of these techniques help us to reintegrate and to wind up whole—not only psychologically healthier, but they are also the steps on the path to what in the Buddhist tradition is called awakening. (pp. 10-11 in your TalkBack transcript)

10. Two Ways to Regain Focus When the Mind Drifts

Staying focused on one thing for a long period of time can be difficult. And just like anything else, it can be difficult to remain focused during mindfulness practice. So, Joan Borysenko gives two strategies that can help people return to their practice and regain attention.

Dr. Borysenko: Years and years ago, I went on a meditation retreat with a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche and he said, “You are never going to get the mind to stop thinking because that is its nature. It is like asking the ocean to quit making waves. It is just not going to happen.”

But then he said, “When the mind makes a wave,
when it starts to think, you leave the risings in the risings without following them.”

That of course is easier said than done – but this is a big part of the mental training of meditation.

Using Dan Siegel’s metaphor of the Wheel of Awareness, we can even see this. You are there – very happily in the hub, feeling peaceful and present – and then, whammo! You put out a spoke of attention to whatever it is – the phone call you forgot to make, the pain in your hip – whatever it might be.

Every time that happens, it really is great because that is the practice! You get to notice, “Whoa! I just put out a spoke of attention. I just followed that rising, and now I’m not in the calm of the ocean anymore. I’m not in the hub of the wheel.”

Every time a thought comes, it gives you the opportunity to strengthen your mental muscles of awareness and letting go. That is really what Dan was talking about: you are developing mental muscles.

I think it is great to give myself and to give other people a frame of reference. Thinking is going to happen – no matter how long you meditate, you are not going to get rid of the thoughts.

It is not about being thoughtless – it is about having a chance to strengthen those muscles of awareness and letting go with your thoughts.
Thoughts are a great thing. Let’s celebrate the thoughts we have in meditation and the chance for mind training that they give us. *(pp. 11-12 in your TalkBack transcript)*

**11. Becoming Non-Judgmental**

One trait of mindfulness, according to Dan Siegel, is the importance of being non-judgmental. But how? Here, Elisha Goldstein gives us two techniques we can teach our clients to be less judgmental and more mindful.

**Dr. Goldstein:** One is to take a three-day process:

One day you are on the lookout for judgment in your mind and you are looking how you are judging yourself and how you are judging other people maybe. So you are just noting this to yourself. The next day, you are looking to find out, “Where is judgment in other people? Where do I see other people judging?” So you are kind of priming your mind to see, to objectify the process of judgment and you are saying, “What do other people judge? Where do I see judgment in other people?” And then the third day, you just see what naturally arises and see if you gain some freedom from judgment in that way.

Another way to do it is to – just to piggyback then on what Chris was talking about when he mentioned Marsha Linehan is she has this notion of “opposite action,” which is to do the opposite of
what you feel like doing. So judgment is a kind of form of kind of trying to get away from something. It is a disconnection.

And instead, what we are doing is – and this is just embedded in mindfulness in some ways, this idea of beginner’s mind, noticing something as if for the very first time or with this essence of curiosity to it.

So what I have found in my experience in working with clients is that if you suggest a notion of, “What is it like to be curious about this? Can you just be curious about this for a moment?” that seems to separate out the judgment that is there and naturally kind of flows you into more of a non-judgmental space because now you are stripping aside the programmed biases and you are seeing something fresh and new, and you are continually doing that.

So you could choose either of those to kind of play with – again, allow experience to be our guide, our teacher – what works for us. And, you know, this is all kind of playing with life. (pp. 7-8 in your Next Week in Your Practice transcript)

12. A Strategy for Cultivating Stronger Self-Compassion

For some, self-compassion can be difficult, and it may take a long time to transform negative feelings towards themselves. But Elisha Goldstein explains a
The way we can help our clients ease into self-compassion and find more lasting change.

**Dr. Goldstein:** When I am working with clients on this, it doesn’t come naturally, even in the suggestion of a meditation, “Look at this with a kind attention, a warm attention, a friendly attention.” That is sometimes very difficult to access. So sometimes what I do is I have a picture of a child, a baby, about a three-year-old little girl, and she is sitting there and she has tears coming down her eyes. And I show that to a client and I say, “What do you notice when you look at this?” and oftentimes the reaction is – oftentimes; not always but most of the time, and I do this in front of audiences and everything like that – oftentimes there is a natural hand that comes to the heart and there is this feeling of, “Ohhh…” that comes.

I think actually Chris says that when self-compassion – you have this experience of like “Ahhh…” – you know, that kind of feeling. And so this natural compassion comes up, this heartfulness comes up. They get the experience of that – because it is not cognitive. And then that is the moment of saying, “This is the way you want to pay attention to that kind of reactivity maybe that is there. This is a way of being kind to yourself.” So I kind of mention that.

And then normalizing the idea that all people get hooked; all people are reactive in different ways and that there is a common humanity to reactivity and so you are going to get hooked.
I love the term that Pema Chodron borrows from the Tibetan tradition – Shenpa – this idea of getting hooked, being reactive, and in that moment of awareness you have stepped outside of it and you have the ability to look at it with that same type of attention that you gave to that three-year-old child with tears coming down her eyes – that kind of attention.

Then you are moving into not just a cold non-reactivity – kind of a warmer non-reactivity in that moment and more of a compassionate non-reactivity that is there. (pp. 9-10 in your Next Week in Your Practice transcript)