

Mental Health over Matter

*Lessons from 19 experts on improving
your mental well-being*

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Warden Press

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*Let everything happen to you
Beauty and terror
Just keep going
No feeling is final.*

– Rainer Maria Rilke

Introduction

Spring 2014

Anxiety and depression had taken their toll, and “Alex” was beyond exhausted. Dark circles sat beneath his eyes, and his skin paled to ash white. To make matters worse, Alex’s therapy wasn’t working.

Alex was living in his small apartment after undergoing a terrible breakup. Alex existed, but he didn’t live. Every morning, he woke up from a short anxiety-infused sleeping session, moved from his bed to the couch, and curled up in the fetal position. When Alex looked through the living room window, the beautiful trees with bright green colors had a permanent gray layer around them. Alex wanted to go home, but he was already there.

If Alex was very hungry, he ordered sweets and a deep-fried pizza online. The rest of the day and night, Alex spent most of his time scrolling on his phone but never replying to messages. He avoided all mirrors in his house because they showed a great contrast with the “happiness” seen on his social media newsfeeds. Alex’s life had a dimmer switch that kept getting turned down.

Merely three months later, Alex woke up excited about what the day would bring him. He occasionally felt a warm glow and an unswayable sense of peace inside. He appeared joyful and bursting with energy. Alex rejoined university and his social life flourished. I couldn’t believe this was the same person who had been curled up on the couch a few months earlier.

Autumn 2013

Alex heard his front door open. It was his dad. “Alex, your situation isn’t improving, and I’m seriously worried,” his dad said. “You quit your studies and spend all your time alone at home. Many people tried reaching out to you, but you disconnected from them. I want you to come with me to the physician right now.” Alex wasn’t feeling it but had no energy to argue with his dad. “Fine,” Alex said.

Alex’s physician referred him to a therapist. *Finally, Alex would have someone to assist him with his mental issues*, his dad thought. Still, there was a major obstacle – Alex had to wait half a year due to the long wait

lists. Alex's dad felt helpless and frustrated. Another six months without help was too long. He desperately created a list of several private therapists and called them one after another. "Sorry, but we can't lower our fees," or "our waitlist is full," was often the response. Eventually, Alex had to wait *eight* months before he could talk to someone who could potentially help him.

Spring 2014

Alex still dragged the massive stone around that held him back and weighed him down. But there was a light, albeit dim, at the end of the tunnel – the day had come when he could visit his therapist. That morning, Alex woke up slightly more excited than usual.

The therapist, a middle-aged man with a casual outfit and a perfect tan, calmly overheard Alex's problems. After a few introductory sessions, the therapist decided on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a popular treatment for depression and anxiety that helps people identify and change destructive thought patterns. The therapy seemed promising but didn't have the desired effects for Alex.¹

Meanwhile, I followed Alex's situation from the sidelines and wanted to provide support. I started asking myself straightforward questions: "Had Alex ever analyzed his nutritional habits? How did Alex view proper sleep hygiene and exercise? What quality relations could Alex rely on?" But other, perhaps less straightforward, questions also ran through my mind: "How did Alex handle social media and news? What were Alex's connections to music, nature, spirituality, and psychedelics?"

I contacted Alex. "What do you think about listing essential areas connected to mental health in which we could try to improve your lifestyle? That's what helped me a lot." I voiced. "I'm willing to give it a try," Alex desperately replied.

We got to work. We changed his exercising, dieting, and sleeping habits first. Alex exercised three times a week, maintained a consistent sleeping pattern, and reduced sugar and alcohol. "I'm starting to feel slightly better," Alex told me over the phone." After integrating these new practices, we analyzed his technology and social media behaviors. Alex deleted all social media platforms and reduced unnecessary screen

time. Instead, he taught himself how to play the piano and went on nature walks twice a week. He picked up meditation and read more books. By steadily improving his life in different areas, he could get back on track and incrementally support his mental health.

“I don’t think I need therapy anymore,” Alex told his therapist eventually. “Okay, but we’ll do three more monthly check-in sessions to ensure you don’t relapse,” his therapist said.

There was no relapse.



I first became interested in mental health ten years ago, as a teenager. I experienced dissociation and felt disconnected from my thoughts and myself. At a party, I started talking to an older man. He had few wrinkles and radiated more energy than many people my age. “When I was a kid, it felt like I always lived in the moment,” I said, “but now I’m often dissociated from the present moment and myself.”

“Why is that a bad thing? I love it when I can tune out,” the older man told me. “Imagine observing the sea every day. Sometimes, the waves are smaller, and sometimes bigger. The point is that they’re all wet.”

At that moment, I realized that perception is everything.

I started researching the influence of perceptions and landed on the topic of mental health. I became interested in the subject and discovered how many evident (sleep, exercise) and less-evident practices (news, social media) could significantly influence mental health. Improving, or even optimizing, my life in these areas benefited my mental health immensely. Over the years, I talked to many individuals with sub-optimal mental health. I registered that they could also benefit from a similar approach besides the more “conventional healthcare approach.”²



Mental health matters. A lot.³ Mental health issues are rising, even though good mental health is paramount for everyone to live content lives and achieve their full potential.⁴ Nowadays, incrementally

improving our mental well-being in divergent areas of life is of great importance; we deal with many novel challenges, such as the rise of prescription medication,⁵ the incredible amount of time we spend behind screens,⁶ and the recent pandemic all amplifying the prominence of mental well-being.⁷

To compound this issue, the “traditional therapy route” is often unaffordable and difficult to access when individuals struggle with mental health. And when people do get therapy, there is still a significant chance that it won’t help them.

To advance mental health in our high-performance, high-expectation societies, I find it helpful to observe the topic through a holistic lens. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. We should discover what practices, habits, and coping mechanisms work for us individually. Many areas intertwine with mental health; advancements in these areas are pieces that form a coherent puzzle.

To facilitate a similar discovery and increase in mental well-being as Alex, I have consulted nineteen experts on different topics connected to mental health. They excel in their respective fields, whether they’re promising researchers, keynote speakers, teachers, authors, or therapists. Some experts base their ideas on rigorous science, while others have a spiritual approach. Yet, all experts have tremendous expertise in mental health and provide remarkable insights. These insights can lead to significant changes, such as adopting a new lifestyle, trying new practices, and changing predominant convictions.

The book is divided into two parts. The first nineteen chapters are conversations with experts who discuss misconceptions, unique viewpoints, and topics of interest connected to their specific expertise in mental health. The second part is the discussion, for which I distill nine overarching lessons forming the common threads running through the divergent topics.

Every chapter connects to one central idea: mental health can be stimulated through different areas of life if we understand how to integrate them best.

Going through a transformation as Alex has done isn’t easy, nor can it be done overnight. But it’s certainly possible.

Relationships & Vulnerability
Dr. Andrea & Jonathan Taylor-Cummings
England



Dr. Andrea Taylor-Cummings and her husband, Jonathan Taylor-Cummings, have counseled people on their relationships for over twenty-five years. Both had successful corporate careers before deciding that educating people on doing relationships well was the passion they carried in their hearts. They recognized that quality relationships are fundamental to mental health, emotional health, and resilience for individuals, families, and societies.

When Andrea and Jonathan were invited to do a TEDx Talk, they had to compress more than twenty-five years of experience into fifteen minutes. Andrea and Jonathan distilled many lessons into four habits that form the foundation of all successful relationships. After their TEDx talk, they wrote the book *The 4 Habits of All Successful Relationships*.⁸ In addition, they successfully co-founded and ran the consultancy firm *4 Habits Consulting*, working with corporate professionals, and the charity *Soulmates Academy Foundation*, working with couples and communities.

[Interview with Dr. Andrea Taylor-Cummings]

What is your background?

“We both have backgrounds in professional services. I initially obtained a first degree in Computer Science. I first worked in IT as a systems analyst and later as a business analyst. I became interested in people and organizational behavior during big change projects. I got the Jamaican Rhodes scholarship to come to the UK and do a master’s in Management Studies at the University of Oxford. That is where I met Jon, who was a year ahead of me on the same course, and we connected immediately. I enjoyed the program so much that I stayed on and completed my Doctorate.

In our first year of marriage, we had the fantastic opportunity to live and work abroad in Japan, and everything was going great. Our professional services careers flourished – Jon went into Investment Banking, and I went into Management Consulting. We were both earning high incomes, and our relationship blossomed. On returning to the UK a year later, we decided to start a business together. The thinking was that with all we had going for us, how difficult could it be? Those became the famous last words.

It took about three months to discover how hard living and working together 24/7 could be. The additional pressure was that our income and livelihood depended on working through these challenges. That was easier said than done. We knew each other well socially but had never worked together professionally. We started to discover vastly different work styles that we didn't respect or appreciate as strengths at the time. Instead, we frustrated each other with unending criticism and tried to change the other person into ourselves. That was a frightening and stressful time because suddenly, everything depended on us pulling together our business, finances, and marriage. Problems at work followed us home, and the relationship started to spiral downward.

Due to our faith, we decided that divorce wasn't an option we would even want to consider, so we looked around desperately for anything to help us work on our challenges as a couple. We came across relationship materials that helped us understand better why we were experiencing frustrations. We realized that one of our critical causes of frustration was actually our different strengths. That was the catalyst for our work on relationship education. We figured that if we could help others work through issues in their marriage as we did, it would be work worth doing. Alongside our day jobs in professional services, we provided relationship education to help people change their behaviors from damaging their relationships to strengthening them. Consequently, they had better conversations, dealt better with the inevitable hurdles, and achieved better outcomes.

Initially, we did voluntary relationship education part-time through workshops and seminars during evenings and weekends. Six years ago, as we both were about to turn 50, we started asking ourselves what legacy we wanted to leave. For what did we want our lives to count?

We realized that 'broken relationships' was a fundamental problem the world needed to solve, and we had something important to offer. Our passion became our full-time mission, and we set up an organization to formalize things. We then had the privilege of doing a TEDx talk two and a half years ago, which forced us to condense our work of 25 years into fifteen minutes. We thought long and hard about our conversations with hundreds of couples, individuals, and professionals over the years, and after crystallizing our thoughts, we

identified four fundamental habits for success. Every successful relationship we had seen exhibited those four habits, while every challenged or failing relationship was missing at least one of them. So, we named the talk ‘The 4 Habits of ALL Successful Relationships.’”

Could you provide me with a short explanation of the Four Habits?

“Habit one, *Be CURIOUS, not critical*, is about understanding that we are all wired differently and propose different strengths. We, in theory, recognize that people are different from us. But in practice, we expect their thoughts and behaviors to be similar.⁹ When we do something wrong or make a mistake, we forgive ourselves, calling it circumstantial – it just happened, and we aren’t bad people. However, when someone else makes a mistake, we see them as fundamentally flawed. Our natural tendency is to judge and criticize any behavior different from ours. Instead, we should suspend judgment and become curious about others’ strengths. The more people are different from us, the more likely they will have strengths covering our blind spots. We need to develop the habit of respecting and valuing differences.

Habit two, *Be CAREFUL, not crushing*, is about how we turn up in a conflict situation and conduct ourselves. Conflict will happen, so we must be prepared to do it well. Sadly, many of us have experienced poorly managed conflict and try to avoid it at all costs. Being ill-prepared adds to the emotional distress and damage we cause to relationships when conflict arises. Our egos and intense emotions tend to get involved because of our natural ‘fight or flight’ reactions and tendency to go for self-preservation at all costs. We can come out stronger and with a better understanding when we develop the habit of turning up well to relationships even under pressure, responding to conflict with more empathy, listening better, and treating each other well. Handled well, conflict is an opportunity to create a deeper understanding, find a better solution, and strengthen the relationship.

Habit three, *ASK, don’t assume*, is about recognizing that we all have deep-seated values, beliefs, and assumptions that drive our behaviors and expectations of others. When assumptions aren’t shared on both sides, we break trust. Talking about deep-seated beliefs and values can make us feel vulnerable, but not talking about them creates distance and prevents building trust and respect. Sometimes we are unaware of our

values and beliefs until someone does something that makes us feel disrespected to the core. Our response is then often visceral – a strong adverse gut reaction that clarifies something is unacceptable. That is the time to get courageous and ask people what you can do differently to build mutual respect and trust.

Habit four, *CONNECT before you correct*, is about communicating value and appreciation in ways that matter to each person. We should be as intentional about building warmth and rapport in the relationship as providing constructive feedback. We are inclined to tell people when they're wrong or could improve. But we don't spend half as much time on the other side of the equation showing that we treasure, appreciate, and love them. We should first build warmth and connection. People go where they feel welcomed but stay where they feel valued."

Do the habits differ for divergent relationships?

"They apply to all relationships. The thing about relationships is that when they go wrong, we generally tend to blame the other person, while it takes two to tango. Even if our part was the smaller part, we need to recognize what it was and learn how to manage better how we are impacting the relationship. We can only take responsibility for our part. So, a great place to start is by identifying how we are coming across to people, which could be with friends, at work, or in romantic relationships.

A concept called the emotional bank account helps us understand this. It's a practical concept we can use to help manage the warmth and quality of your relationships. We each keep a (subconscious) mental record of every interaction with each person we relate to. If we perceive the interaction as positive, it lands as a deposit in our emotional bank account. If we assess the interaction as unfavorable, it lands as a withdrawal. It isn't about the other person's intention but how we perceive their behavior. The balance across the deposits and withdrawals describes the temperature of the relationship. When the balance is positive, the relationship is in a good place. We feel more warmth and overlook misunderstandings more quickly. When the balance is overdrawn, the relationship is scratchy. Everything can be a problem, and tense arguments can erupt soon.

Once you understand the concept of the emotional bank account, you can use it to help manage all your relationships. You now know that every time you do something that lands badly, even if you do so unintentionally, you're making withdrawals from people's emotional bank accounts. And if you aren't careful, before long, you can find yourself in a situation where their emotional bank account with you drops to zero or into overdraft. You will know that their emotional bank account isn't in a good place when things you might have done in the past with no response now get a negative response. In that case, you need to work on rebuilding the relationship to get it back to a good place. This is true for every relationship. You can get a sense of the relationship quality with your work colleague, spouse, partner, or child by understanding what is happening in their emotional bank account."

Are there any toxic relational habits that many perceive as healthy?

"One of the first things that come to mind is 'one-upmanship.' You destroy relationships if you always try to put the other person down and show that you are better. One-upmanship is embedded in our culture, but it makes a withdrawal in the emotional bank account every time. Not taking responsibility for your impact on others is another withdrawal. It's unhelpful if people are unwilling to hold themselves accountable for their behavior and instead blame it on their personality, for example, saying, 'That is just the way I'm, and that is just how I deal with anger.' We can work on self-development and change behaviors that damage relationships. We can choose how we want to be experienced in relationships, especially with our dear people.

Another fallacy is not being proactive about building solid relationships and assuming they will happen naturally. We seem to think we can turn up, do whatever, expect the relationship to flourish, and then only start paying attention to the relationship when things break down. I can't speak for every society, but that is the norm that undoubtedly destroys relationships in much of the Western world. Relationship breakdown, especially between couples, is sky-high.¹⁰ People only spend money and invest in relationship skills when it's too late.

But every relationship will face hurdles. When you have two thinking, breathing, opinionated individuals in a room, an exchange of

words or difference of opinion is bound to occur at some stage. So, we should become more proactive in building relational intelligence upfront as a natural part of personal and professional development. We teach people to drive before they get in a car. Why don't we equip people upfront with tools for doing relationships well?"

What is the link between relationships and mental health?

"There is a strong link. Mental health is embedded in quality relationships. Relationships are a vital source of resilience, self-esteem, a sense of self-worth, and belonging. High-quality relationships are tied closely to a sense of well-being, the strength to deal with challenges, living longer, and getting over illnesses faster.¹¹ Human connection is the next crucial need for well-being after our basic physiological and safety needs are met.¹² We are relational beings and are meant to connect to others. The stronger our relationships are, the safer we feel to be our true selves, open up and build meaningful connections that benefit our mental and emotional health.

Every year for #MentalHealthAwarenessDay, the UK Mental Health Foundation develops its campaign around a theme. In 2016, the theme was relationships.¹³ One of the key findings was that relationship breakdown is killing us as fast as smoking and alcoholism and faster than obesity and lack of exercise. They concluded that we must make every effort to do relationships well and eliminate obstacles to succeeding. I can't overemphasize the importance of being more proactive about developing strong, lasting, quality relationships. In our society, we reduce relationships to, for example, the quality of our sex life, emotional attraction, or physical desirability. We have reality TV shows that promote sexual attraction above building trust, commitment, and emotional health for individuals, families, and society."

What were some of the more surprising lessons you came across?

"Things can be simple but not necessarily easy. Many of the principles and insights we discuss aren't rocket science, but they take deliberate effort and practice to change our behaviors. When a relationship is under pressure, we need to be intentional about our

actions and know the specific behaviors that will leave the relationship in a better place.

Managing emotions is fundamental, as humans are emotional beings. We feel things and make decisions emotionally but try to justify them logically because we struggle to talk about feelings. We must learn to pay attention to our relational intelligence and not respond immaturely. Our relational intelligence helps us make better choices about our behaviors and enables better conversations, even when our insides scream like a child to throw a tantrum.”

Many people are aware of their emotional responses but find it challenging to take a step back and react more maturely. What would you advise them?

“Everyone has their default approach to conflict, an automatic response that kicks in under pressure in an attempt to protect ourselves. Some people try to dominate the situation and win at all costs. Others run away, give in, or argue for hours, trying to convince the other. These approaches are very ‘me-centered.’ The focus is on getting our way, so we feel protected, safe, and justified, regardless of the impact on the other person or the relationship. The problem is that when everyone is only looking out for themselves, the relationship suffers, and people often get stuck in emotional distress. Instead, we need to develop a ‘we-centered’ approach that focuses on what is best for the relationship. One way to do that is to think big picture – what do you want long-term for the relationship? Your actions now impact the outcome long term.

Another factor is to learn to listen well. Generally, we only listen long enough to formulate our argument and fire back. Instead of listening, we spend time re-loading. But if we take the time to understand the issue, we often realize that it was just a misunderstanding, and the other person never meant it that way. So, pause, breathe, and be in control of what comes out of your mouth. One more tip is to try not to use accusatory language. Instead of saying, ‘you did this or that,’ say something like, ‘I felt disrespected when.’ Expressing your honest feelings is a vulnerable thing to do. But it takes vulnerability to build a genuine and meaningful relationship.”

Can you be “too vulnerable” in a relationship?

“There are several levels of vulnerability. One class of vulnerability is about feeling free to be your authentic, true self rather than having to pretend. Another type of vulnerability is opening up and speaking honestly about deeply held secrets, dreams, and fears. Depending on the quality of the relationship, you don’t want to go too deep into vulnerability before you build trust. Sometimes we reach a level of openness and vulnerability that the quality of the relationship can’t sustain. Building trust and being vulnerable go hand in hand.”

What misconception about romantic relationships would you like to resolve?

“One misconception is that physical attraction is enough to sustain a long-term romantic relationship. Those are just physical and chemical reactions, while the foundations of a healthy relationship are trust, vulnerability, and commitment. Relationships can’t last without these aspects because emotions come and go. Some assume that immediately getting physical creates a strong relationship, while there is no foundation. We get into intense relationships too quickly without the relationship quality to sustain them. Choose better, take more time, and allow the relationship to grow. Don’t just get to know the person but also the people around them. Observe the individuals and things that influence them. You will understand their values, their thoughts, and whether there is true synergy. You can discover some of these things before you’re emotionally entrenched and go through a painful breakup.”

What role should boundaries play in a healthy relationship?

“Some people believe that a good relationship doesn’t involve any arguments. I have yet to observe a healthy relationship without disputes. The key is to argue well and recover quickly. Clear boundaries help create a healthy space for a good old argument that strengthens the relationship. Boundaries on how you expect others to treat you should be firm and well-maintained. Those are ground rules that create safety in a relationship. You don’t allow yourself or others to cross those boundaries, no matter how angry you get. For example, my husband and I have the ground rules of never hitting each other, never

walking out of the house in anger, and never threatening divorce to be spiteful.

Discover what makes you feel safe and respected as an individual, and establish ground rules on how you connect, interact, and respect each other, even when tempers flare. Other contextual boundaries need to be discussed and negotiated with others to keep relationships healthy. For example, setting boundaries and managing expectations with colleagues around when you are available for work is essential. You re-establish these boundaries based on where you are and what is going on in each season of life.”

Imagine we have tried everything, and nothing has worked. How can we gracefully let go of someone we have cared about for a long time?

“That is a challenging question. The problem is that people often don’t seek help until they have inflicted such emotional damage on each other that they have drained their emotional bank accounts and lost the will to work on the relationship. In an ideal world, we would start with better relational intelligence and never get to the stage where such emotional damage occurs. People would understand differences more, show more patience, hear each other better, and build more substantial respect and trust. Part of me always hopes there is a way to restore the relationship and move forward. But if you have exhausted all options, find a way to part well that doesn’t cause any more damage in the process. There is always pain involved, so think of the most honoring, respectful, and healing way to part for all concerned. Of course, if there is ever any abuse involved and your life or health is at risk, get help and go to a safe place as soon as possible.”

What topics within relationships deserve more attention?

“We don’t talk enough about relational intelligence. We must educate people on how to do relationships well and take personal responsibility for showing up to their relationships. We will have better relationships if we intentionally develop our relationship skills. Experiences for children will improve as their mental health is closely tied to the quality of the relationship between their parents.¹⁴

Quality relationships are fundamental to mental health, emotional health, and resilience. To reverse the trends around family breakdown,

mental ill-health, and suicide levels, we need to become better at the fundamentals of relationships. That helps reduce mental health concerns for teens and young adults and enables tighter homes, families, workplaces, and teams. The future of society hinges on our ability to do relationships well. As we move into a global, hybrid environment, we must stimulate well-being by strengthening the relationships that support us and influence how we turn up to life.”

What books have influenced your ideas about relationships the most?

“*The Two Sides of Love*, by Dr. John Trent and Gary Smalley (2019), is the revised edition of the book that transformed how we related to each other and got us started on this relationship education journey almost 30 years ago.¹⁵ It changed how we understood and respected our different strengths and empowered us to work more effectively together. We learned to divide work and roles based on our strengths and to cover for, rather than criticize, each other’s weaknesses.

The Five Love Languages, by Gary Chapman, also greatly influenced us.¹⁶ The book explains how everyone feels loved, valued, and appreciated most powerfully in one or more of five different Love Languages. Many misunderstandings occur in relationships because we try to show love and appreciation in a way that matters to us but doesn’t land as powerfully for the people around us. We leave people feeling unloved and unappreciated simply because we don’t know the language that speaks most strongly to them, and all our efforts fall flat. Learning to speak each other’s Love Language is a compelling way to make people feel loved, valued, and appreciated on purpose.”



Mindfulness
Jo Pang
United States of America



Jo Pang is a founder, facilitator, and avid mindfulness practitioner. He has shared his ideas on mindfulness, self-awareness, and self-acceptance in his Tedx Talk. Jo has more than ten years of experience helping people become healthier versions of themselves through a combination of self-awareness and social awareness.

Mindfulness runs like a common thread through Jo's life. It has prompted him to make many impactful changes in his life, due to a better understanding of his thoughts and surroundings. According to Jo, we must learn how to notice thoughts, gain insights, and let them pass. Contrary to using mindfulness as a tool to control our thoughts and actions better, he is more interested in the wisdom that mindfulness brings to the surface, which we can use to create an improved relationship with ourselves.

What got you interested in mindfulness?

"Ten years ago, a person recommended the book *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chodron.¹⁷ That book stuck with me and opened my eyes to mindfulness. As I got into mindfulness meditation more, I realized how we always think we should be better at everything. I registered that many of us, including myself, always aim for this striving energy. We lose the opportunity to be accepting of ourselves at that moment."

What are some valuable lessons you learned from your mindfulness journey?

"One of the biggest realizations is that we are not our thoughts. For most of life, we're consumed by our thoughts, emotions, and stories in our heads. When we practice mindfulness, we notice the thoughts that come and go. We start to realize how we identify with our thoughts. But we have a choice to notice and *not* identify with these thoughts, which is a repeated practice of mindfulness. We have a short space between detecting our thoughts and identifying with them. That space has a lot of power; it gives me a different perspective on how I experience life.

A second learning is a sense of how to relate to thoughts. Initially, many people may fight their thoughts or wish they were something different in their practice. They can end up frustrated and may keep

thinking about the same thing. Our perceptions and judgments are essential. We learn over time that how we meet our thoughts, whether neutral or even compassionate, changes how we are for the rest of our lives. A little bit more compassion towards these thoughts can already elicit many changes – when we can meet every thought a little less negatively, and with a little less resistance, we learn how to be with everything.”

What is your advice to people who are starting with meditation?

“Many people are harsh on themselves and feel they have failed when caught up in their mental stories. On the other hand, they imagine performing the practice adequately when it feels calming. If there is one story I can change, it’s that one. Mindfulness is much more about how we meet the things that we experience. That matters. When you realize that thoughts arose and you were caught in a story for the last five minutes, that is the practice. Rather than living on autopilot constantly, you notice where your mind went and choose to do something else with it by returning to the present moment. Thus, you have already been successful by doing that.

Some people view mindfulness as if you only would be successful if no thoughts pop up. For what would you be meditating then? It’s incredibly challenging to achieve that, especially when many have lives where things constantly infiltrate them. We don’t live monastic lives where we make our lives super small and steady. It’s essential to recognize the practice within that context. Most of our lives will look different from some great spiritual master who lives on a mountain and doesn’t talk to anyone for five years. Don’t expect your practice to look anything like theirs. That doesn’t, however, mean that your practice isn’t worth it.”

What other misconceptions exist about mindfulness?

“The misconception that we do poorly when we have a busy mind is number one. Number two is the conception that people who practice mindfulness are somehow always calm and mindful. As if we can attain this state all the time. We aren’t perfect. I like to think of myself as a person with mindfulness practice and try to imagine what I would be

without it. The insights we get and where we come from are different for everyone. Someone can have 30 years of mindfulness practice and temper tantrums every day. But maybe it's one less time than without mindfulness training. We should realize that we all have our journeys, and mindfulness has nothing to do with years of practice.

Sometimes, we can imagine what we will be. On a silent retreat, I'm the 80-year-old version of Jo. I love seeing that. I enjoy experiencing and feeling that this is me. But the 80-year-old version of Jo can arise because everything is controlled for me. I don't have a phone. Everyone meditates nine hours a day. I have been silent for five days. I don't read the news. I have no work to do. I may see a future, more enlightened version of myself during the retreat, but I'm not like that every day. We need to have reasonable expectations. The practice can support us incrementally, but it's truly a lifelong practice.

Another misconception is that mindfulness is sometimes presented as a tool to improve whatever you do. As if mindfulness makes you even more productive and creative. I have more of a Buddhist background underneath. Mindfulness has led me to do many radical things that seem unusual to the outside world. I have quit multiple jobs. I have made many changes.

Mindfulness isn't always a peaceful thing. When you're aware of your body, you might, for example, realize that your heart sinks to the bottom of your stomach, or you only cough when you think about work. You start to develop awareness that leads to changes in your life that may not have been intended. The conception that mindfulness is a tool only to increase control in your life doesn't resonate with me. If we open ourselves to what mindfulness offers, we may realize how our lives need to shift in ways we didn't plan. I'm less interested in using mindfulness to have a better body or think a little faster but more in the insights that mindfulness creates to make shifts that are brave but true to you."

Would you say that your opinions on topics, such as the meaning of life, have changed since you first started pursuing mindfulness?

"It's less of an opinion and more of a valuation. That is a better word. It's more about valuing the meaning of life that arises from mindfulness.

It's the same thing if you walk fast by a tree on a hike because you're trying to reach that waterfall at the trail's end. If the tree were your destination, it would have much more meaning. You might stop to look at it. You may look at the details on the bark and smell it. You would suddenly realize a life exists, which may already have lived for a hundred years. You would recognize the value.

Mindfulness is the same thing. It doesn't change our opinion, but we start to notice things and their meanings. When we don't strive to go somewhere else, be somewhere else, or be someone else, we realize that much more is available to value."

How can we make mindfulness a habit?

"Having a set time every day is recommended because you may not feel like doing mindfulness some days. But you must sit with all that rather than start using it as a drug. You might use mindfulness as a drug if you meditate whenever you feel anxious.

Mindfulness isn't necessarily about the outcome of feeling more peace. That is only the tip of the iceberg. There are so many benefits related to self-insight and all things we gain when mindfulness isn't only used as a drug but to develop a different relationship with ourselves. Practicing mindfulness at a set time every day leaves less for decision-making. When do you feel like it? Should you do it now? Are you a bad person? It takes all that clutter out of it. Practicing mindfulness at a set time is ideal, but anything is good. Everyone is different, so it's hard to prescribe a particular thing.

One thing that can be helpful is a spot you use every time. It helps to create a little special section that triggers your mind. I have a particular shawl that I put on. It tells my system that I'm about to meditate. I may light an aromatic candle. Sometimes, people need to incentivize themselves because meditating isn't always fun. You could even give yourself a small reward after meditation.

Moreover, guided mindfulness apps can be helpful. Ideally, I would choose qualified teachers with many years of practice from established places. But it's second-best to listen to their practice, as many people don't have local teachers."

Everyone talks about the positive effects of mindfulness. Does daily mindfulness practice also have downsides?

“It’s difficult for me to imagine the negative effect of becoming more aware of what is happening. Meditating may be confronting if someone has a lot of trauma and unhealed experiences. When you have traumatic experiences during meditation and still force yourself to meditate, that could lead to a bad situation, especially when you miss support from others.

I had done many years of therapy before I started mindfulness meditation. I had already been working on things and making peace with them. You don’t need to do that, but it helped me increase my understanding.

Mindfulness isn’t a standalone practice. Sometimes it’s talked about as if mindfulness is all you must do. People may say that your body, mind, and relationships will be healthier when you practice mindfulness, and you will be a spiritual person forever. I think that is way too overstated. Mindfulness is one tool. One part of life.

Mindfulness may raise awareness and insight into unhealed parts; it can bring up stuff in your life that you’re usually too busy to address. You may become aware of old memories and anxious thoughts may arise during practice. I see that as a good thing. You now have an opportunity to do something about the situation. That might include getting different kinds of support from people. But a disequilibrium can occur if you’re unprepared for these thoughts and lack the proper relationships in your life. Meeting these thoughts is a valuable part of the practice, but adequate support is always essential.”

What are the effects of mindfulness on mental health?

“I think about it in two ways. There is a holistic approach and a Western approach. The Western approach sees mindfulness as medicine. A lot of research centers around the immediate effects of daily mindfulness practice.¹⁸ Mindfulness accumulates to alleviate some anxiety and stress.¹⁹ You start to meditate to reduce anxiety because people often report being calmer after ten minutes of exercise. That is the Western way of understanding the connection with mental health. The second way of understanding is to make changes in your life that