

WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



Training your mind

Jennifer Fisher (Jen): Right now, you are listening to a podcast, but I'm also betting you are doing something else maybe folding the laundry, you are on your commute, maybe you are out on a run. So, are you really listening? And how much of this are you really retaining? When was the last time you actually sat down and did only one thing solely for the benefit of your own well-being? Today we are talking about practicing mindfulness because that's the key to getting you there.

This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I am Jen Fisher, Well-being leader for Deloitte and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk all things well being.

Teaser - Laurie Cameron (Laurie): *When I'm feeling a strong emotion, I use it to self-regulate or down regulate the emotion to create a little space and actually allow the emotion to complete its sine wave if you will. Every motion has a curve, they last about 90 seconds, but we feed it with thoughts and we get all worked up and jacked up, and it could last for a day or two. By creating a little space and just allowing it to be here, then the emotion doesn't control or affect my behavior.*

Jen: I'm here with Laurie Cameron, she is an author, speaker, and consultant on mindfulness. Laurie, welcome to the show.

Laurie: Thank you, Jen. It's great to be here.

Jen: Let's start out with the basics. What is mindfulness and what is meditation, what is the difference?

Laurie: I love that you start with that question, because they're is so often used synonymously. Mindfulness is simply paying attention on purpose in the present moment with a certain kind of filter, certain attitude, and that is paying attention with openness, curiosity, and compassion. So, mindfulness is a way of being and we develop that with mental exercises, whether they are formal, whether they are micro practices, and those we can think of as meditation. So, meditation is a set of exercises that we do to develop the skills and cultivate a capacity to be mindful, to be aware, to know what's happening when it's happening.

Jen: So, it's like going to the gym, we exercise our muscles; meditating, we are exercising our mind in order to be able to be mindful?

Laurie: Yeah, beautiful. So, I love that metaphor of going to the gym and while we are saying mind and mindful, it's very much an embodied capacity. So, we are exercising our mind and body, our nervous system, our ability to tune into emotions, just tracking what's happening, and how we were standing, and how we were moving into a room. So, we are training in a kind of embodied way of being in the gym, in the mind-body gym.

Jen: So, then you are basically saying that you can be mindful in everything that you do, in every activity throughout the day, but I assume there is probably things that we want to make sure that we're more mindful of.

Laurie: Yeah.

Jen: When we were with others, when we're doing something that's important, and other things maybe like folding the laundry where we necessarily don't have to be so mindful unless we want to get the perfect fold on our shirt.

Laurie: Unless we're Marie Kondo. She is mindful when folding the laundry.

Jen: Yes.

Laurie: Yeah, so I think what's really cool is that you can be mindful doing anything just like you said and there are certain times when the stakes are higher than others, so when I am listening to my client explain what's keeping her up at night or when I am listening to my daughter who is in high school, coming and telling me about a difficult day, I want to be there and what mindfulness helps me do is cultivate something called meta awareness. It helps me see where my attention is. So, when I am in those moments that count, when I am doing something creative, creating a PowerPoint slide for one of our programs we do together or in a creative brainstorming session, I can notice when my mind wanders when I'm lost in thought and bring it back.

Jen: So, how is that different than just saying I'm going to focus?

Laurie: So, the thing is, we can aspire to a lot of things, to attentive things, to focus, to be here now as the certain folks like to call it, but the challenge is that's not our biology, so we were wired to have our attention not focus, we are actually designed to be unfocused.

Jen: Why is that?

Laurie: Because we are not built to be happy or to be in a state of well-being necessarily, we are actually built for survival and our minds are designed to constantly scan the environment, to look left and right to detect threats, and then once we see those threats, we hang onto them and we ruminate and we repeat them and go over and over in our head with this negative or difficult thing that we perceive is happening. It might not even be real, but we are designed for survival so it's very hard to focus. And the good news is the mind-blowing news I think is that we now know that whatever experience we repeatedly give our brain will change the structure and function of our brain. So, what that means, simply, is that I can do certain, deliberate, specific, tested in the lab, exercises for my brain and I build up the part of my brain that's responsible for focusing, and that offsets that evolutionary biology.

Jen: So, that's where meditation comes in?

Laurie: Yes.

Jen: So, talk to me a little bit about what the practice of meditation looks like, feels like, I often say that I'm a horrible meditator. I think probably most people feel like they are horrible meditators because I can't turn off my brain, but the point is not to turn off your brain, right? And so, I think there is a lot of misconceptions out there as to what a practice of meditation is, or it should be, or perhaps we are aspiring to be the perfect meditator when there...maybe isn't a perfect meditation, it's different for everybody.

Laurie: I love how you put that, Jen, and so many people, when they find out what I do for a living, they say "oh my gosh," you don't know what it's like in here. My thoughts are racing, I'm not cut-out for this, you know, put me on an exercise bike, I can do that. But you don't know that this mind is different and that's sort of the fallacy of uniqueness, we all have racing minds, and what I tell people, and they feel so much relief, is that we are not trying to empty the mind or clear the mind of thinking, that's just bad press on the meditation circuit. We're trying to actually just see what's going on in there, we are just cultivating a capacity to see our thoughts and see our emotions as if we are standing on the bank of a river and watching them go down the river, that's really what meditation is. It's not clearing the mind. So, you asked about what it looks like, what it feels like - one of the foundational basic core meditations in the world of mindfulness is focused attention training and I also call that mindful breathing and that is, and you talked about focus earlier, so this is the gym equipment that we are talking about going to in the morning. And here we just need an object of attention and it can be anything, it could be this mic I'm speaking to, it could be a candle you might see in a glowy golden magazine, but we use the breath and we use the breath because it was always with us and it has the side benefit of relaxing and calming the nervous system. So, we use the breath as an object of attention, bring our attention to the breath, and just a very deliberate, but gentle easy way and focus on the inhale and the exhale, and then inevitably for every person on the planet, our mind wanders. And then a thought comes in, "what am I going to have for lunch, oh! I forgot to send that email, oh! no, I have got a big presentation tomorrow," and then anxiety hits. So, it's normal that a thought comes in and what we do with the mindfulness meditation is simply notice the thought, allow to be there, but don't start working it and just bring attention back to the breath. And we do that again and again and again, and every time we begin again and do it again, we are doing a rap at the gym with the prefrontal cortex.

Jen: So, what's the minimum amount of time that I have to do that for in order to get a benefit from it?

Laurie: I love that question. I always get that. I get that everywhere, but the first time I got it, he said "what's the minimum effective dose" and I said, "well, just one breath will have a lot of benefit, but if you can do 10 minutes a day, you will really start to see some changes," but the thing that I would emphasize, you asked what is it feel like, and I love that question, Jen, and I want to talk about that, because I think it feels different between minute one and minute five, and minute ten. And for a lot of folks, the first minute that they sit down, they are very busy, overactive, quite full mind feels like the inside of a popcorn machine, or the other thing that happens is emotions that we repressed, maybe we got a zinger of an email and then we kind of felt that come up in the body and we stuffed it down, emotions kind of come up. So, it's not about feeling like you are sitting on top of a mountain, in a state of bliss. It might be that when you start meditating, it feels kind of wild, like a wild ride, and that's okay, because we are meeting, we are cultivating a capacity

for compassion, and we start with ourselves. So, we just allow this to be here like "wow! check out my mind today" and just meet that with kindness, you really have a lot going on.

Jen: Compassion and kindness towards our self is difficult.

Laurie: That's really hard. That's the black diamonds and I start people on the bunny slopes of kindness towards others, but that's why we can pull that into our mindful breathing, training, so we are not only focusing attention, exercising our skill of attention, but we can also exercise our self-compassion. So, it can feel a little rocky in the first minute or two and that's why I encourage people to give it five minutes or seven minutes because then things start to settle. It's like when you shake a snow globe and you set it down and then at first, everything is flipping all around, but then ever so slowly the snowflakes start to fall a little bit and settle and then you can see clearly and that's where we are cultivating with mindfulness, this is ability to see clearly.

Jen: And so how is that type of training and how will that benefit me in my day-to-day ability to be present, be engaged, to not react emotionally. I mean, does it give me the ability to control my reactions, or is it the ability to pause, like what is that we're training to do?

Laurie: A couple of things, so what I love is the capacity to shift my state on-demand. So, if I notice that I'm experiencing really strong emotion, or for me, I have a tendency to feel overwhelmed, so I use the breath like I do a mini-mindful breathing meditation to just stop and allow things to settle. And I ask myself "what's important right now." So, I use it for focus when I'm feeling a strong emotion, I use it to self-regulate or down regulate the emotion to create a little space and actually allow the emotion to complete its sine wave, if you will. Every emotion has a curve, they last about 90 seconds, but we feed it with thoughts and we get all worked up and jacked up and it could last for a day or two. By creating a little space and just allowing it to be here then the emotion doesn't control or affect my behavior. I kind of create some distance. Another one that we do is journaling and we do many different types of journaling, but one that we do is journaling for self-awareness, for self-discovery. Just this week, right after we did a journaling practice followed by a three-breath reset, like a little one, two. He came up at the break and thanked me so much for that practice. His words were "thank you for forcing me to a journal," which made me kind of laugh a little bit, because I wanted to say, I didn't force you, but he said to me "thank you for forcing me to journal, because I have a situation that's really disturbing me, I haven't been able to sleep and I'm distracted in all my meetings, I'm not much fun to be around and this has been going on for more than a week and I just journaled about the situation, and all the sudden I saw it differently. I was out of the experience and I was writing about it and then I could read that" and then I said "oh, that's not really that bad. I can handle that, this is going to be okay." I could feel his whole body, he said, "I have so much relief" and then we did the three-breath reset, which is another practice of three breaths, and he said, "Laurie, those breaths were the first fresh easy breath I have had at the day. When we did mindful breathing earlier today, I couldn't even do it because my mind was so full of this difficult situation." So, the journaling actually helped him, pay attention to what's going on in a different way than mindful breathing. So, there is kind of different ...

Jen: And how much time did that take the journaling take post the three breaths?

Laurie: We had four journaling prompts and I gave them about two-and-a-half minutes each, so that was about eight minutes then he read over what he wrote. So, let's say generously, 10 minutes and then the three breaths reset was about a minute.

Jen: Okay, so 10, 12 minutes in your day to have that kind of impact on you, your relationship, kind of every aspect of your life.

Laurie: And, I'm moved just to hear you say that, because I saw this guy's face like I knew, he just spent the last week in agony, really suffering, and when we were in that state of contraction and tension and rumination and self-blame or maybe blaming someone else who knows, we were not in an optimal state of creativity and resourcefulness.

Jen: Right.

Laurie: So, he shifted his state in 12 minutes.

Jen: I think the burning question is why aren't we all doing this?

Laurie: I think that is the burning question.

Jen: So, what happens when you get up in the morning and you start your intentions for that day and the day goes completely in another direction?

Laurie: Oh, that's real life.

Jen: So, that's where meditation helps, right?

Laurie: Yeah, so one of the things that I share, and we are teaching in mindful leader and I use it every day, is this mindset of allowing and accepting. Because we often have the best laid plans, right? We have a blueprint for what we think the day will look like and it goes sideways, or something happens, and when we can cultivate using our new skills or muscles of awareness, to not be swept up by the surprise, but actually to see it. It's like you are not in the traffic jam, you're a traffic helicopter looking at the traffic jam. And the mantra that I teach in our classes is "okay, so it's like this" or "all right, so this is here." So, using this phrase, and I will say that like "okay, so this is here, this is happening..."

Jen: So, when your flights delayed or cancelled or...

Laurie: Yes, that's a great one. And I will say "this is here." Another practice that is probably my number one most used practice in my life and the number one practice I almost always teach is the self-compassion practice and that's from the research of Dr. Kristin Neff and Dr. Christopher Germer. And Harvard Business reviewed just at a huge spread on self-compassion in October, because the science is unrefutable that if we can acknowledge a difficult moment, that's step one of this reset process. Step one is mindfulness and we acknowledge this is hard, "oh! my flight just got canceled and I was heading to a very important meeting, I'm not going to make it or I was heading home, even more important." And step two is common humanity and that is where we actually take a breath and in our mind we say, "we connect to all the other human beings that have experienced the very same thing." So, whether it's a missed flight or it's a diagnosis of a difficult illness, we stop and say "oh! I'm not the only one that's not going to get home tonight or that missed the flight or didn't show up to a client for an important meeting." And that common humanity, that acknowledgement that this is part of being human, it shows really profound effects in the research...

Jen: Can we do that instead of blaming ourselves?

Laurie: Yes. We switched from judgement or self judgement or blaming the airlines to acknowledging that this is part of being human. And then the third step is the step of self-kindness, self-compassion. And that is where I actually take my hand and put it on my chest when I do this and say, "it's okay, sweetheart" or you could say "this is hard, this is a really difficult thing, what do you need right now?"

Jen: So, why is self-compassion so hard for us?

Laurie: You know that's been studied quite a bit. And there is a belief that's deep in us, it's not conscious, but I think a lot of us believe that if I meet failure or a setback or if I say something that hurts someone, or I turn in a project or I missed the deadline or it's over budget, and I meet that moment with kindness, I'm going to do it again or I'm not going to get better, I'm not going to grow. So, we have this internal inner critic, this really harsh voice, I think to protect us to keep us safe, I think our inner critic means well, it really wants to keep us out of trouble. So, it's like "oh! man, I can't believe it, you dropped the bomb, you dropped the ball," and it's really not helping us, because what we were seeing in the research is that the inner critic actually puts us in a state of low motivation and we are less likely to take risk, we are less likely to take on the big project...

Jen: Yeah, goes back to survival mode?

Laurie: So, self-compassion actually shifts us out of that and one of things we were doing this week is, we practice this in the moment on the fly, three-step practice, and then we also practiced a wonderful tool called a letter from a mentor and we write a letter to ourselves and some people do it from a mentor, other people might do it from a high school teacher or a good friend, and we write...So, it's a journaling exercise. This one, Jen, takes four minutes and you write a letter to have the voice of that person give you advice for a difficult situation you are in. And when we did that one and then we discussed, had a rich discussion on which one of these was most effective for you and for a lot of people on the room, they love the on the fly three steps, and for other people, they find that letter a much easier way to offer them with self-compassion.

Jen: It's someone else's voice?

Laurie: Yes, and they believe that that other person wishes them well and that their wise, and ...

Jen: It's not really another person?

Laurie: It's really yourself, which is the kind of the cool magic, it's a side door and...

Jen: So, I don't know if this is actually a self-compassion or not, but when I get in those moments, I always say to myself "tell the negative committee in your head to sit down and shut up."

Laurie: So, I like your negative committee.

Jen: I don't know if that's self-compassion or if that's more on the negative side, but it tends to work for me.

Laurie: Well, I think it's a cool strategy, I would love even you adding to that. So, that's sort of mindfulness peace like "I hear you committee, you are pretty loud with your megaphones over there, so you can have a scene..."

Jen: I'm not going to listen to it...

Laurie: Yeah, one thing I wrote in the book is some people say "silence is the inner critic." I like the phrase "befriend the inner critic," because it's not going to be silent, I don't think the voices ever really go away, I think what we can do is befriend them. So, maybe experiment next time with "hey committee, I see you guys, I put a sofa in the corner of the room for you, go over there, have some tea, but I'm getting down to work right now."

Jen: Should I tell the negative committee to go meditate perhaps?

Laurie: Yeah, go tell them to meditate and then add to that a moment of kindness for yourself like, "all right, Jen, you got this!"

Jen: What is evening mindfulness look like in a mindful day?

Laurie: So, I think it starts with how we come through the door. I have talked to so many people and a variety of...

Jen: And this can be a literal door or virtual door, it's when you kind of turn off from work and transition into life?

Laurie: Beautiful. We say kids have trouble with transition, but I think we did too, because that negativity bias that we have in the brain, negative stuff sticks like velcro and the positive stuff rolls off. So we walk in the door, some of us, you can envision it this post-it notes all over us of all the difficult rough moments or all the to-do's or that lingering challenging conversation with our boss, and we carry that into the sanctuary that for me is really important. So the evening section in my book talks about the transition and then even goes into cultivating with intention and purpose an environment that nourishes you from your food, to the art, to the layout of your furniture, to the colors, to eliminating clutter, that your home life isn't just a place to crash, right, so the transition I think is rough one and a lot of people bring that in and then they see their loved one and vent. And then all of that negativity and all that energy is inflated or shared or amplified onto someone else, so even at the door...Norman Fischer is a wonderful...

Jen: Of no relation to me unfortunately.

Laurie: No relation, I don't know, I think there might be some connection. He talks about hands on chair or doorknob practice of as I...because we tell the brain, as I put my key in the door, as I touch the doorknob, that's going to cue me to take a few mindful breaths to just allow the day to settle. Some of my clients do that in the driveway, people that drive, I love like sitting in my car and it's weird, I know, because I don't have a long commute normally, but just sitting in the car and just breathing a little bit just allowing the day to settle and then taking a few breaths and then going into my house and seeing my teenager and my husband, and I'm different. I want to show up as this fresh, loving person, but if I don't consciously shift sometimes I come in as a stressed out, overwhelmed person, and I know that I need to make that shift. So, that's one thing about evening. We love to drink tea together. So, I've spent the last 20 years studying mindfulness with a Zen, Buddhist teacher from Vietnam, and living in monasteries with the nuns and monks in Europe and US. And, I learned a lot from them and one of the things he taught us and actually taught my daughter, Eva, is to drink tea mindfully. And by all means anyone listening can replace that with your beverage of choice. Even a delicious red wine can be more savored if we bring mindfulness to it. But as a family we will brew a tea, we have a collection of pots we really love, we have collected. And we will brew some tea and we have it on a tray and we

sit down together, we actually sit on the floor, and have the tray in the middle, we light a candle, and we notice the tea, we smell it, we taste it. And we actually do a practice called watering each other's flowers. We only do this whole thing on Sunday nights, but a couple of nights, we could drink tea and that's a gratitude practice where we talk about something specific that happened this week that we appreciate about that person. I cannot recommend that practice enough, I write about it in the book because that kind of allows things to reset by telling people what you appreciate, hey feel seen and validated, and it creates connection.

Jen: So, what do you tell people that tell you, I'm sure being and teaching this in the corporate world, that tell you that all of this is like too woo, woo, and out there and that's something that "those people" do, whoever "those people" are, "I can't possibly do that." I mean I know all the science, all of the research is there, but how do you kind of breakdown those barriers?

Laurie: So, what I do, especially for people that are performance driven high achievers is, I don't even talk about the science, I will talk about elite performers. So, I'm a Tom Brady fan, he just won the Super Bowl again, he has won more super bowls than anyone on the planet and he is a meditator...

Jen: And he is a very good sleeper too.

Laurie: Yeah, so, he is our well-being poster child, not a child, but he and his wife Gisele are meditators and it's no accident that he can perform like that under pressure. His technical football skills got him on the team. His ability to directly perform under pressure is coming from his meditation and mindfulness training. And we are here in DC today and our beloved Capitals won the Stanley Cup and right after they did, I wrote a blog post on how that team trains the mind. The goalie in a hockey game, I found this out with the research too, is one of the hardest athletic jobs on the planet, because ...

Jen: You are following this tiny little puck...

Laurie: Yes, that's moving like lightning speed and he can't move his attention off, the football players every 30 seconds to 40 seconds can look around, take a breath, relax their brain, not the hockey goalie. So, he actually trains with focus and attention exercises to be able to do that. So, it's no accident that Steve Jobs was able to have breakthrough innovation creativity, he meditated every day. It's no accident that Tom Brady keeps winning the Super Bowl.

Jen: So, it's meditation as the performance enhancer?

Laurie: Yeah, and that's what I'm committed to. I have been in Human Performance and Development for 30 years. So, for me it's less about stress reduction although that's an amazing side benefit. For me the story is really about optimizing performance in this very short life. Because I think that life is really precious and short, and if I can optimize my performance, my relationships, and my well-being then why wouldn't I? And as you and I talked about, it doesn't take a lot of time.

Jen: So, I don't have to sit on the floor cross-legged to do it, do I?

Laurie: No. One of the things I love talking about here and other places is that when I walk in, I say, "okay, did you guys expect me be dressed in white, and I have heart music coming out of my laptop, and birds and incense?" So, you don't need any props, we can

take the things that we already do and do them mindfully and what happens is we are not only training ourselves to do one thing at a time, when I'm chopping the carrots, I'm chopping the carrots, but we also get that hit of well-being, right? It feels better and we have the science out of Harvard, when my mind is focused on what my body is actually doing, that's highly correlated with well-being. If I'm chopping the carrots and replaying a conversation I had that day - if we look inside my brain, you would see low levels of well-being. So, I can pick some things, not everything. We are not going to be present 100 percent of the day, but I can pick things like this meal that I'm going to cook. I'm not going to watch the news and have a conversation and participate on the conference call while I'm sautéing garlic in olive oil. I'm actually going to be right there. But I also want to emphasize that when training our mind to pay attention towards positive and what's good and how we can show up more compassionately, we actually can amplify the joy and that is very important to me to help people not only focus and generate calm on-demand, but have a life that's more joyful, more happy, more positive, because we are like...

Jen: Who couldn't use more joy?

Laurie: I know, and the thing is at work, we are like ripples in a pond.

Jen: Yeah.

Laurie: We affect everyone around us.

Jen: Absolutely.

Laurie: And if we can cultivate that way of being, we affect our clients and our teams and everyone.

Jen: That's amazing. I'm so grateful Laurie could be with us today. Thank you to our producers, and to you, our listeners, you can find the WorkWell podcast series on Deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword WorkWell to hear more. And if you like the show don't forget to subscribe, so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you would like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, reach out to me on LinkedIn, my profile is under the name Jennifer Fisher or on twitter at jenfish23. We are always open to recommendations and feedback and of course if you like what you hear please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.

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