

MIND LIFE PROJECT

with Dr Elise Bialylew

An Interview with Susan Kaiser Greenland

Dr. Elise Bialylew interviews **Susan Kaiser Greenland**, former lawyer turned Mindfulness educator and Author of *The Mindful Child*.

Dr. Bialylew: Susan, thank you so much for being part of the program! I really appreciate your time today.

Susan Greenland: Oh, I'm happy to be here!

Dr. Bialylew: Um, I thought it would be great if we just get you to give a brief, a brief sense of your background and how did you come to be teaching mindfulness in schools and to children?

Susan Greenland: Well, I'm a lawyer by trade, I was a lawyer for seventeen or eighteen years; I practices contract law and while I was practicing law, I started meditating to help me manage stress. And, eventually my husband and I had a couple of kids and I thought meditation might help them to some different, you know, even very young kids are under stress these days, it feels that they are. And at that time which was in about 1997-1998 there weren't really any kids' programs out there, um, Jon and Myla Kabat-Zinn's book " Everyday Blessings" hadn't even yet been published; they were busy writing it but I didn't know about it. And so, I figured I would take some practices that I had learned as an adult and try to adapt them and see how they work for my kids.

Dr. Bialylew: So, why do you meditate? Or did you meditate, or do you meditate?

Susan Greenland: Yeah, well, originally I started meditating as a way to help manage my stress. And I think that that's a wonderful doorway in and a doorway in that many people use as an entry form now and it's fantastic. Now, many, many years later, I meditate for the purpose of transformation. I want to change. I want to evolve and change in a way that meditation, you know, has a way of facilitating.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm. And it's funny because I think a lot of people that are new to the practice or haven't done the practice can look at it from the outside and it just looks like so passive, and then when you say, you know, 'now I do it for transformation' people might be wondering what, how, what is the bridge

between sitting down with your eyes as...open or closed, focusing on your breath...how does it lead to transformation? Have you got any...could you speak to that?

Susan Greenland: Oh, yes. In another word for transformation is freedom. Now I, now I practice to become more free and it's, it's a psychological form of freedom. So, yeah, it does look passive and that's one of the things we need to be careful about when we are helping people new to meditation, um, start out because, well, it seems passive at first it's an awful lot going on in your mind, everybody knows that when you sit and you start looking inside and that's what being in relationship is very important as you're meditating - to try to find a group of people who are also meditating or a meditation teacher, or some people call it a spiritual friend, but somebody that you can talk to about your experience who's been having similar experiences, so they can help contextualize it for you.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm.

Susan Greenland: But it's anything but passive. I mean, there is, there things can happen by going inside and moving your attention, um, their help with this process of transformation or becoming more free from psychological habits to ways of thinking but what we really do it for is for how it affects our day-to-day lives when we get off the cushion.

Dr. Bialylew: Mm.

Susan Greenland: So, that time on the cushion, the motivation for being on the cushion is really so that that time on the cushion informs our time off the cushion...or chair.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm. Yeah, haha. I have a chair. And, how do you personally define mindfulness? Because there are different definitions it seems like they're becoming more, more and more definitions all the time but what's your perspective on what mindfulness actually is?

Susan Greenland: Well, I think there's a couple of different ways to look at it. One is mindfulness from the perspective of classical teaching. It's a stance of attention. It's a way of paying attention on purpose. But mindfulness is that term is being used in popular culture now is as it comes to me much much more. And should be meaning much much more. So, because mindfulness is being used to describe a way of being in the world and now way of being in the world involves several components, attention being one of them that stance if attention, a way of looking at life experience on purpose and suspending judgement while you're looking and coming back looking back in discernment, um, but it also includes balance being emotionally balanced and includes compassion. So, the mindful way of life has those, we call it in a way "A, B, C"s, those three...

Dr. Bialylew: Mmm, I love that.

Susan Greenland: Attention, balance and compassion. But you can also talk about mindfulness as a very specific stance of attention that is trained through, um, introspective practice.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm. Great.

Susan Greenland: And I think as we get, for, you know, we're, I don't know how much your listeners will have, um, have been reading about mindfulness, but we've seen a little bit of a back-clash now in popular media and I think that's why, I think that's fine to be expected and certainly more good than bad is coming out of all of the craze around mindfulness. But it's important that as we go forward, even more clear than we were before about its definition so, we're all talking about the same thing.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm, great. Thank you. And, so, now, would you, I wanna dive deep a little bit into your work in schools and with children. So, perhaps, maybe we could start off by just exploring how mindfulness can be beneficial to children?

Susan Greenland: Oh, I think it's just a lot of fun for them when we start there, if it's not fun I wouldn't wanna do it. So, I think it's a lot of fun and it's very free in a way it gets back to some more old-fashioned values of slowing things down and taking our time and really attending to what's happening right now on the present moment. And these life skills that we teach through the practice of mindfulness start with the very simple life skill of stopping or pausing and if we can just teach children to notice that about to that moment when you're about to say or do something that doesn't feel quite right and to pause, before they act, or before they speak, that's huge. And that's the very first thing that we teach through mindfulness practices with kids. And the center of all of these different life skills that we teach focusing...the center of it is focusing but the life skills we teach are stopping, and, learning to direct your attention to a specific object. And what happens when you choose to direct your attention in that way is there's a natural quiety of the mind and body and when the mind and body quiets, then we tend to be able to see more clearly what's happening in around us. And we can do that, we can sometimes we can move more toward actions and relationships and...That are caring and connected. So those are the things, those are the very specific life skills that we teach young children through simple games and activities and songs.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm. You say about one or two activities, I mean you're going to these a lot in your book "The Mindful Child" which was really very practical and useful, so, obviously if there are teachers listening that, that would be a very great book to get your hands on, but could you give us a taste of like, some, sort of a sense of what do you actually do with the kids? One or two examples of mindfulness as...

Susan Greenland: Sure, yes, it depends on the age, remember, because that's one of the things that's a little bit more...one call it complicated but a little bit...takes a little bit more effort when you're working with kids because of the we have to have the activities appropriate to the age. So for very young

children we use a lot of songs or simple things. So, one would be simply (singing): "I stop and I feel my breathing...", and then we breathe in and out, "Peaceful and calm, I'm ready to listen".

Dr. Bialylew: Yeah, that's cool.

Susan Greenland: So, that's the kind of thing we'll do with children and we have story up to story of children who would go home and teach their parents breathing songs, there're different breathing songs and who will even sing them or say adjusted the parents on the back of the car when the parent is all stressed out.

Dr. Bialylew: It's fantastic!

Susan Greenland: For all the kids that sort of thing it doesn't work quite so well, we don't...we have a little trouble with buying with that...But with all the kids there's some simple techniques that we can teach one that we did as a family was very very helpful is my...I was working at the time outside of the home as a lawyer; my husband was working; we had two young kids going in different directions and so, when we were getting out in the morning it was always quite chaotic. We...as much as we tried to have the backpacks ready and the lunches packed, that just didn't tend to happen for us. But when we were all running out the door we would stop at the door and take a couple deep breaths. So that we would be in a rush and then we would pause and we would collect ourselves and go out to the day that went by. And those simple interrupters, we call them in the book "the mindfulness interrupters", those simple interrupters are the type of things that we can teach kids and their families to just integrate into their lives at home.

Dr. Bialylew: And so, even that very simple short practice of like stopping at the door and taking a few breaths, so you actually do that, you manage to do that regularly, or it was kind of a...?

Susan Greenland: Right, we do it every morning.

Dr. Bialylew: Every morning! Yeah...

Susan Greenland: Yeah.

Dr. Bialylew: And, so, you've found that even that simple practice was, had a very positive impact?

Susan Greenland: It's huge! It' huge, huge, huge! And the integration of it into aspects of your routine; bedtime is another wonderful time to integrate a little bit of this mindfulness. And we really do in this teaching children to move their attention away from what they're thinking about at the time into a sensory experience. So, if our children are worried or upset or even overly excited, it doesn't necessarily have to be an upset that is how, that is kind of getting our children agitated. Sometimes they're overly excited about something. What we can do is we could just say "OK, right now we're gonna move our

attention away from what we're thinking about into the feeling of breathing", for instance; the sensation of breathing. So if you're lying at bed at night and the child is having a hard time going to sleep, you can put your hand on their tummy or pillow on their tummy, or just stuff down it on their tummy and just breathe with them, moving attention away from what they're thinking into what they're feeling; and very important, that's an important instruction, because what often happens when we ask children to quiet is that they do quiet, but they continue going around in their thoughts in a loop just like we do as adults. But when we teach them simple, simple activities to move their attention away from their thoughts, just for a moment, into a sensory experience like feeling your breathing, feeling the bottoms of your feet against the ground as you walk, that sort of thing; it has a way of calming the whole nervous system.

Dr. Bialylew: Do you find that children actually, children or young, you know, all the children depending on what age they are...do you find that it's, I mean, for a practice just like that to save time? Do kids buy into it? Do you, do they tend to engage with it or do they get wrists up and they don't understand it?

Susan Greenland: Well, we...one of the instructions that come from out of the Tibetan tradition meditation is short moments many moments. Or short time many times. And so, we don't practice with children for long periods of time like we may as adults, or to be honest with you, I really encourage parents to practice a short time many times as well. It's hard to carve that chocolate time every day. So we practice for short periods with the children and when they become distracted or restless, we don't push it too hard. But, yeah, remember there's a lot of things going on with these bedtime rituals. One is the actual training of these techniques, of these life skills that help them calm and settle themselves. But another things going on is just wonderful parent-child, you know, togetherness and attachment and attuning to each other. And, so, it's as long as you're in a really wonderful attuned relationship with the children, they very often are game to do something, even if cookie is mindfulness theme.

Dr. Bialylew: Haha. Great. Yeah, that's, I mean a lot of parents talk about the difficulty and that should be very helpful takeaway, right there.

Susan Greenland: Yeah, this, that practice helps a lot of kids at night.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm, what about...

Susan Greenland: One that's stuffed in is what really helps.

Dr. Bialylew: OK. So, and when you said you know, adapting it for another ages, what sort of is the youngest age? I think in your book you were talking about four or five?

Susan Greenland: Yeah, the most, the youngest that I've worked with children that are on their own without their parents is four years old. I'm not saying that you can't work with children younger and I

have some schools that I've worked with who are very successfully working with three year olds without their parents. So, but I think you can work with children of any age with their parents even infants, not that the infant is actually going to be learning the mindfulness, but the parent will learn; well, the parent and the infant are regulating each other; the parent will learn that as she gets upset, if she moves her attention, or he moves his attention away from what he's thinking about into the sensation of breathing that will help calm his nervous system or her nervous system and the baby will respond. And so, working with mindfulness for parents is very important and very helpful to have the parents develop a practice themselves and then it just naturally will spill over into their time with their children.

Dr. Bialylew: It's beautiful because it seems like it releases by direction, it could be the parents lending that transmit it to the kids or like what you were saying - the kids learn and then teach their parents the songs and kind of infuse it into their parents, yeah.

Susan Greenland: Well, it works even with teachers and even with those of us who've been doing this for a long time. The relational aspect of mindfulness if you really are open and present with what's happening in serving the child in front of you now, my first, one of my first teachers taught me that, in something that used to carry in a card along with me when I was teaching schools, "Just serve the child in front of you. Now, be there with that child and don't worry what is gonna happen next". That creates a beautiful co-learning loop where who's teaching, who's learning is really (ap...)

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm. On the topic of teachers, could you give a couple of suggestions of an activity...I mean, I totally understand that it's really requires the teacher to understand mindfulness more deeply, but let's say, there's someone out there that does, and they just wanna bring one or two practices for this month, like, for into their classroom. Let's say it's a classroom of like ten-year-olds or something like that. What could you possibly do?

Susan Greenland: Well, I tried to find some for ten-year-olds, cause that's an age that, the younger ones are, classroom management with the younger ones is a little bit more difficult, but the younger ones are much easier with respect to buy in. by the, you can get a few eyes rolling and that sort of thing, so buying is a little bit more complicated; as far as the specific classroom management technique it really does help is just very simple one that we call "balloon arms" and I have so many teachers who tell me that they use this all the time and what you do is you just...you establish it so that you have your hands, when you put your hands on your head you ask that the children see your hands on your head and then they do the same and stop talking or stop moving around. And then together you sink your arms like a balloon, imagining that for ten-year-olds you can imagine that when you breathe in you fill your arms up like a balloon and when you breathe out, your arms come down, and you can repeat this three times, sinking; first, just to your arms to each other so that the children are doing this together and once they get the hang of it, doing three breaths that way, so when you're breathing in and breathing out and this can change to this way, or anyone of a number of ways. And that's a great way if the class is a little bit rowdy to help them settle and is a great way to start sinking, um, breathing,

together with armory movements; in really what you do is you're moving your attention again away from what you're thinking about into a sensory experience. So, this sensory experience can be either the movement of the arms, cause when everybody in the classroom is moving each other like this there's not a lot of room in it going on.

Dr. Bialylew: Yeah, yeah.

Susan Greenland: And the same way, if you're sinking your breathe; this is a way of visually pointing at when you're breathing in and breathing out. And it has again a way of moving attention back into the body and out of the mind and settle in the nervous system.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm, oh, that's a great one! Thank you! What did you call it? Balloon...balloon?

Susan Greenland: I call it balloon arms and different people call it different things.

Dr. Bialylew: Sure. Yeah. And what about another common question that comes up is around particularly for teenagers, um, I don't know, in around emotional regulations to managing stress, managing emotions that can be quite overwhelming....have you...are there any...can you speak to that in terms of, you know, I've taught a few people and there're often parents in my class and, you know, they're saying, "Oh, how can I give something to my teenager that would help them manage when they're getting overwhelmed?"

Susan Greenland: Mhm. Well, a couple of things. One is to, remember that to use mindfulness to help with emotional regulation it still really starts with attention. It's very hard to have this; it's difficult to have the code to pass it, to hold a strong emotion, if you don't have a strong attention. So the first thing I would do is encourage the development of mindfulness practices to build attention, feeling you breathing, that sort of thing, or concentrating on a chosen object, or counting, or listening. Those will, those practices build attention that then will develop the capacity to help strong emotions, to help with the strong emotions.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm.

Susan Greenland: Another thing to remember is that it's not uncommon when we go into classes for the children who were the most enthusiastic about mindfulness and really have very quick early, you know, results, but then they positive experiences very quickly, they come in a few weeks down the line and then be quite disappointed and say "mindfulness didn't work. I was really really upset and mindfulness didn't work. I tried to feel my breathing and I was so upset with my brother, I couldn't, I just felt worse and worse and worse..."And that's a very common thing and that's one of the things that we have to do is really be clear about expectation as far as how mindfulness can help. And also talk to the kids about how...what I do when that happens is I talk to them about their personal trainer, that I am

supposed to be going to and how I've been working with the personal trainer on my arm exercises and I tell the children "Look, I'm working on my arm exercises, can you feel my, you know, muscle. They say "Yes, Mrs. Kaiser, we can feel your muscle". Then I say "Do you think I can go outside and pick up their car? See, that's kind of what you're trying to do right now, this, is a new muscle of mindfulness, and you're doing great at it and it's getting stronger. But to really try to use it when these times are very very difficult, sometimes we can have some success and sometimes it's not so successful, so don't get frustrated and don't give up.

Dr. Bialylew: That's great.

Susan Greenland: But what, so, the best thing to do with anyone, whether they're an adult or a child, and if they are very very upset and trying to use some emotional regulation technique, but yet don't have the capacity to hold this strong emotion or may not be skillful or wise to hold the strong emotion, is again, moving to your body with some movement related activity. So, things like shaking, and there's a shaking activity in the book - that's very very helpful; and it again gets you out of your head into your body and help settle you. Or walking. I mean, if you think a lot of all the different traditions, pacing was a very popular activity. The walking back and forth is very helpful; you're moving and you're helping you settle. The difference between pacing and what we call slow and silent walking is that again with our slow and silent walking we are not tending to what we're thinking about; we are tending to the sensations of the bottoms of our feet as we step.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm.

Susan Greenland: So, we move our attention away from our concerns to step, step, step...step. It is not that we don't go back and ultimately think about what's upsetting us or what's the problem with us. But by taking some time and getting out of that loop of upset into our bodies, we have a way of then going back with a little bit of a more clear perspective to look at what it is that upset us in the first place. So, or what the very real stress is. You know, I wish that mindfulness could make all the stress go away for the children. Unfortunately that doesn't happen. But what mindfulness will do is give us skills that help that stress settle, so that we can see our experience more clearly and then come back and look at what's causing the stress or causing the upset and make decisions that are on our own best interest and also the best interest to the other people around us.

Dr. Bialylew: Mmm. I mean, that switch that you're talking about ...for many people they grow up not even realizing that you have that power to make that switch from stories, emotional overwhelmed to the body and I think when you talked about freedom, and getting more freedom that seems to be like a really key, key point.

Susan Greenland: Yes, yes. That is, yeah, yeah, I agree with you on that. A lot of people talk about stop, breath and think and I think that's missing a step. It's: stop, breathe, feel, real feel the sensations in your

body and then go back and think. Because without that if we go directly into thinking, we can be a little bit calmer, but it's not exact, but we don't have the clarity that we have if we really do take the time and notice these sensations. And we also gather very very useful information when we really feel what's happening in our body when we're upset. We can then notice "Oh, when I'm upset, I've really start to feel a little shaking inside". So then we you start feeling shaky inside before you understand that you're upset, you can use that to move in one of these practices a little bit earlier on. So that the upset may not be quite as upsetting.

Dr. Bialylew: So, just to kind of reinforce that point, so, the idea is that when there's a...for a parent let's say it's for a teenager, so when we're emotional overwhelmed happens, it's about step one is perhaps the stop, breathe, feel, kind of, maneuver, maneuvering into the body, and then, over time with that practice people can become more familiar with the sensations of anger or anxiety and then catch that sooner, so that it becomes like a positive, a positive feedback loop.

Susan Greenland: Yeah, that's it. And the only other piece I would add is that if there's a parent or a caring adult in the loop who under...who sees what's going on, who the teenager or child is happy to talk to, just being available to have the child talk about their experience and then reinforce this process is very helpful. So that the child or teenager isn't doing it all on their own so that they get some reinforcement from the community.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm. And in that second step of like being available to talk about it, do you mean like so once the practice is done just getting out of the head and tuning into the body, taking a few breaths settling, then it would be, then what, then the parent would....

Susan Greenland: "How do you feel?"

Dr. Bialylew: Yeah, so have to choose a few words and have a conversation.

Susan Greenland: Yeah. "How do you feel? Does it feel different now than it did before?" Have you noticed any patterns and don't be surprised if someone doesn't really wanna talk to you right then. It's OK. You know, we don't need to force ourselves on them, but just being available and not being upset if they don't want to share but just being available.

Dr. Bialylew: Sure.

Susan Greenland: And having contacts that we can help them with.

Dr. Bialylew: Just to take you back to what we were just talking about earlier on attention and emotional regulation...um, can you just disentangle that a little bit more? Around how it is that paying attention is related and connected to us being able to manage our emotions? More respectfully, because attention, sorry, cause attention is this word I think is coming to the world through

mindfulness, but generally speaking like, you know, people don't often think "Oh, I need to improve my attention". It's not sort of an automatic connection with how that can be beneficial, so yeah...

Susan Greenland: And attention isn't just one thing. Attention is a series of processes and...That also gets confusing. Or when you think of trying to regulate your emotion if you think of, if you just, if you just return to what it feel like when you get upset. When I get upset, what I feel like is I sometimes feel as if I'm just about ready to burst out of my skin. I feel like I just something is coming up and then just feels like I'm gonna explode. So, when that happens, trying to stay set in the center of it and not be reactive and just allow it to pass through you, is something that's a capacity we develop in sitting mindfulness practice. It's a very important capacity. So when you think of attention, you often learn in mindfulness practice what's you're gonna do is just focus to pay attention which is you're gonna move your attention to a specific object, whether it's a feeling of breathing or something you're looking at or a sound. And if your mind wanders, that's a distraction, you don't bitch yourself about it, you note that your mind is going, but you bring it back to this chosen object. So that's a focused attention and we develop that kind of concentration with things like counting and that sort of thing. It's very very useful. And it's necessary for this wider stance of attention, the stance of attention where, which we then develop later on which is when a feeling comes up that we notice it and we just sit with it, we stay with that feeling and we watch how it moves through our bodies and through our minds and we watch what happens and if we start engaging with it and getting upset by it, that's OK, we notice that when we try to let go of that mental component and just notice what's happening to this, to our bodies and minds when these strong feelings come up that too requires concentration. It requires that quality of attention we were training first of being able to keep your attention with an object, without your attention wandering. So, that's why these, the concentration piece of mindfulness is important to develop because it helps us be able to stay steady in the midst of strong emotions and notice what happens in our minds and bodies when the emotion is taking us. And part of being able to do that requires the development of this other technique of attention, of a more concentrated attention. Does it make sense?

Dr. Bialylew: Yes, it does. Yes, thank you.

Susan Greenland: So, that's why if we try to move to, you know, emotional regulation without dealing with attention, and working with mindfulness, we can...helpful strategies can be developed but you're...but the real essence of mindfulness, the real kind of magic of mindfulness really involves a development of attention within this particular world view that also includes emotional balance and compassion.

Dr. Bialylew: Mhm. Great. Thanks for clarifying that. That's really helpful. So, the listeners will be able to find more at through your book "The Mindful Child" and I'll put a little link to that. And, yeah, it's been a pleasure talking to you! Thank you so much!

Susan Greenland: Thank you! Thank you!