

# Mindful Recovery with Rebecca Williams

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**Rebecca Williams:** so, folks who are struggling with addiction, why is this thing called mindfulness? Helpful? Well, as you know, folks who struggle with addiction are really hard on themselves. There's a lot of judgment there for sure. , folks in recovery would certainly have strong cravings and, um, mindfulness does really awesome things with cravings.

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habitual situation happens.

That was dr rebecca williams one psychologist off the clock

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**Diana Hill:** Okay. I'm Dr. [00:01:00] Diana Hill practicing in seaside, Santa Barbara, California.

**Yael Schonbrun:** From coast to coast. I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

**Jill Stoddard:** And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of Be Mighty and The Big Book Of Act Metaphors.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

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Hi, this is Diana Hill here, and current times have really inspired and motivated. Many of [00:02:00] us to want to take committed action in our lives. Make meaningful change that supports social justice, our health, our relationships, what we're doing in the world. And I am interested in helping you do that. So I'm going to be running a workshop on committed action. Make meaningful change in your life. That's online through yoga soup, which is my home yoga studio. That's doing some great work in their own committed action towards social justice. This workshop is a sliding scale payment from 25 to \$45. It's going to be held on Sunday, August 16th, from three 30 to 5:30 PM. Online. It does offer continuing education for masters level therapists and LPCs. And in the workshop, you'll get a chance to learn what committed action is, what it is not, how values are key in motivating change. And we'll use the matrix, which is a simple, quick, but powerful [00:03:00] tool to support you in making value-based change in your life. So join me in, on August 16th, you can sign up through my website, which is [dr. Diana hill.com](http://dr.dianahill.com). Or you can sign up through yoga soups website, which is [yoga soup.com](http://yoga soup.com). I look forward to meeting you all there.

**Yael Schonbrun:** this is the L I'm here with Jill today to introduce an episode on mindfulness and recovery from addiction. I had on a guest dr. Rebecca Williams to discuss this issue, which is very timely because. rates of opioid disorders are going up

there has been. A ridiculous rise in the sale of alcohol and the jokes about gaining the COVID-19 are rampant. And they, these all suggest that we really need to pay attention to how we're coping with the stress of the pandemic. Because for most of us, when stress rises, we turn to coping mechanisms that aren't always healthy.

And Jill, you and I were talking about this before we started recording, and I [00:04:00] know that you can kind of relate to some of that stress. Leading to unhealthy coping mechanisms and that you've also seen it in your private practice.

**Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, absolutely. I think that there has been such an increase in autopilot and, um, you know, both with, with myself and with my clients, as you said that, you know, for these last four months, I think we've all sort of shifted into this survival mode.

This really kind of like primitive hind brain, um, survival mode and. We revert back to these reactive kind of autopilot places. And so I know for me, that has meant, um, you know, eating less healthy than I normally do drinking a little bit more wine than I normally do. Um, and so I found this episode really helpful.

There were a lot of helpful. Reminders about the importance of mindfulness that like just being aware of how we're feeling and what we're doing [00:05:00] is such a critical step to, you know, getting out of that autopilot mode.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, and I love that Rebecca offers all sorts of concrete strategies. So if you know, mindfulness really helps you to take a step back and notice sort of make space for the feelings and the thoughts and internal experiences that we're having.

But her work really goes. A number of steps further in offering sort of active strategies to choose paths that are more value consistent on this podcast. We're constantly talking about values and sort of connecting to what's really important to us, but sometimes, you know, if we have this habit of really unhealthy.

Coping mechanisms, whether it's substance abuse or overeating or shopping or gambling, it can be really hard to know what to do with those uncomfortable feelings or thoughts. So a lot of terrific strategies in here that can be really helpful in this time of stress to stay on a mindful path of recovery.

dr. Rebecca Williams is a [00:06:00] psychologist and award-winning co author of two books, integrating mindfulness and recovery from addictive behaviors. Her first book, the mindfulness workbook for addiction, a guide to coping with grief, stress, and anger that trigger addictive behaviors and corporates over 60 worksheets and exercises for readers and therapist to identify healthy coping strategies in recovery.

And her second book, the gift of recovery, 52 mindful ways to live joyfully beyond addiction a pocket coach of mindfulness skills that readers can practice everyday to stay well focused on self care and commit to a healthy recovery. Rebecca is a lifelong yoga practitioner and brings the ancient teachings of yoga and meditation into understanding mental health and recovery. Welcome, Rebecca. I'm so happy to have you here.

**Rebecca Williams:** Thank you so much for inviting me.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Well, I love your books. Um, for many reasons, including that they integrate so many different approaches so that it's an integration of mindfulness on its own with acceptance and commitment therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and then dialectical behavior therapy. And you integrate all these approaches. [00:07:00] folks manage addiction. So that means that you take a very flexible, compassionate approach to addressing the various complications of addiction. So there's a lot to talk about in your work, but I was hoping that you could start us off by first offering definition of addiction.

How do you explain what addiction is to patients as well as their loved ones?

**Rebecca Williams:** no more. Let's start with the definition of addiction. That's a great place to start. Um, well, most people probably know addiction is a compulsive need to use a substance or do a troubling behavior like gambling, despite the consequences to either you or the people around you.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Okay.

**Rebecca Williams:** So that's the quick definition of addiction and it's not always one size fits all.

So that's why sometimes we give, um, addiction checklist out. Um, we have one in our book, mindfulness workbook for addiction to help people figure out the signs. Um, Of addiction and, and help them identify what's going on for them personally, for [00:08:00] example, trying to quit, but not being able to as assign increasing use is assigned for addiction.

Some people have blackouts and memory problems, uh, sneaking around, uh, to get drugs or alcohol. A lot of folks get into financial legal family, um, problems. And that's a sign that we use to figure out addiction. Um, sleep problems, as you can imagine, health problems, um, when they become overwhelming, a lot of folks in, in the practice may lie about their use.

So I think therapists getting used to that folks might be lying and to try to get underneath that. Um, folks have loss of interest in doing activities, um, unless they include drugs or alcohol, of course. And, uh, some people will come into our office because they're taking risks and, and while using drugs or alcohol, for example, driving while intoxicated, getting their first DUI and [00:09:00] coming into the office with that kind of problem.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, and I think that that's an important just point of psychoeducation that the, the symptoms of addiction really vary. Some of them are really physiological. So there's sort of the withdrawal and tolerance symptoms. So withdrawal is if you stop taking a substance that you notice, physiological effects and tolerances needing more and more of the substance to get the same effect. And then some of them are really behavioral or interpersonal. So you're talking about consequences and relationships or legal consequences and still continuing to use despite those consequences. So you can kind of see a range of. Symptoms. The other thing that I also think is important to point out is that we're, not just going to be talking about addiction to substances, although that's a main focus of your work, but it's also addiction to other things like gambling, spending, even eating. So there's a lot, addiction can cover a lot of disorder. Behavior. [00:10:00] Um, and some of it really is specific to substance use, but, but a lot of the strategies that you offer apply to addictive behaviors, even outside of of substances. And I think that's actually a really helpful, um, about, about sort of how applicable your work is to like a whole range of behaviors.

**Rebecca Williams:** yes. Life stressor is absolutely. Yes, it does cover a lot and yeah. Especially those troubling behaviors that, um, kind of go unnoticed. Like you mentioned, the, um, overspending and gambling and, uh, social media addiction of course is a big one right now and porn addiction. So you're right. It does kind of open up the gambit for a lot of different, um, troubling behaviors.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And we're, we're recording just as a point of fact, we're recording this during the quarantine, during the pandemic, and so. The stressors that we're encountering in the world are huge and we're trapped in our home without access to a lot of the healthier coping mechanisms we might have [00:11:00] access to.

And so I think it's really an important time to be talking about addiction and how stress. And, coping fits into pattern behavior. That's really hard to, um, inter interrupt. And so one of the things that you talk a lot about is this sort of the crux of your work is mindfulness in the context of addiction and recovery. So it was hoping that you could speak to why mindfulness is so important for those struggling with addiction.

**Rebecca Williams:** yeah, super question. Let me first define what mindfulness is because, um, it's been bandied about quite a bit of less years, so let me kind of ground everybody in

what. The way I think about it. And then we'll, we'll take it from there. Um, Jon Kabat Zinn, most people have heard, he's got a bunch of books out on mindfulness and meditation.

He's a physician who's helped a lot of people tap into the healing quality of mindfulness and meditation, um, for medical conditions. So [00:12:00] that was where things kind of started. He brought it from Buddhism to, um, to us here. And, um, his definition, I like, and it says, um, for the most part, that mindfulness is being aware in the present moment on purpose

**Yael Schonbrun:** Okay.

**Rebecca Williams:** without judgment.

Well, well, well, well, uh, well, mostly,

**Yael Schonbrun:** unpack there.

**Rebecca Williams:** right, right, right. We got to unpackage this here. Well, most of us can learn to be aware of the moment. I mean, and we'll go over some. Tricks of the trade for that one. Um, the tricky part here for most of us, including myself, is, um, to be aware without judgment. Um, our minds are constantly judging and evaluating and making decisions and, you know, uh, really kind of, uh, all day long are, are on and judging every PR pretty much everything and everyone, um, So the purpose of mindfulness is to slow the mind down, to take a breath and begin the [00:13:00] process of letting go of judgment.

And that's a huge skill, but once we get it, we get it and we can really activate that on throughout the day. So, um, folks who are struggling with addiction, why is this thing called mindfulness? Helpful? Well, as you know, folks who struggle with addiction are really hard on themselves. There's a lot of judgment there for sure.

I mean, folks are beating themselves up all the time for a variety of different reasons. Um, folks in recovery or, uh, would certainly have strong cravings and, um, mindfulness does really awesome things with cravings. I want to talk about the brain a little bit. Of course. Um, the, what I think of cravings, um, cravings are an intense mind, body, brain desire to use.

So in the way I think about it is cravings happen right before a person has difficulty coping with a particular situation. Okay. Or person. Um, so a craving comes, [00:14:00] it's like a rush that happens in the brain right before, um, difficulty and usually folks who were addicted. Automatically go to the drug or alcohol or that troubling behavior as a way to cope.

It's kind of autopilot it's happened many, many, many, maybe thousands, or maybe hundreds of thousands of time over the course of a lifetime to do, uh, the behavior of drinking using. Um, or the troubling behavior. So mindfulness is a powerful tool to help the person slow down, pause and provide a moment of calm in a chaotic world before, um,

**Yael Schonbrun:** Okay. Okay.

**Rebecca Williams:** habitual situation happens.

So essentially mindfulness is a way to kind of move around the craving, help you stop. And then the best case scenario is to make a difference. Choice point a different habit, and we're gonna unpack what that, how that works in the [00:15:00] brain in a moment. But it's nice to know that mindfulness is a way to decrease your reaction and your reactive thoughts and cravings.

So that's, what's cool about mindfulness and addiction. It really is powerful.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, I love, I've heard it described as mindfulness, allowing us to respond instead of react. And there's just a little bit more, it's like in that mindful pause, you have this opportunity to reconnect to your values or to make a more intentional choice as opposed to just being reflexive and what it is. And how is it you're responding to what's happening inside of your body or your mind? Um, so I wonder if you can kind of go into the brain biology and activity behind, cravings and behind some of those habits that get built over time.

**Rebecca Williams:** Yes. I want to talk about something called neuroplasticity if you've heard of that. Right.

**Yael Schonbrun:** go ahead and define it

**Rebecca Williams:** yes, this is we're talking about the brain brain stuff. Now, [00:16:00] neuroplasticity is just a way to say that your brain can heal when you change from a bad behavior to a healthy behavior over time.

That's the way I think about it. So your brain has pathways and in addiction, it's automatic pathways that go to go to the drug. When you're feeling stressed, you go to drugs. When you want to celebrate you go to the drug. All the, all the time the brain automatically says, Ooh, that feels good. I want to go back there.

Now when you're in a treatment program or you're in, um, Uh, in therapy with someone who's working on addiction specifically, you can actually help the brain heal by training it to take a new pathway, a new habit, but it has to be over and over and over again, the new habits, instead of going to drugs, you go to breathing or you go to meditation or you go outside for a walk over and over and over again.

So the pathway that goes toward addiction gets, [00:17:00] um, shrinks and gets smaller and gets weaker. And the pathway that goes to healthy behaviors gets stronger. So actually what happens in neuroplasticity is that you can change your brain pathways and that's fantastic news for everybody, not just folks in recovery, but everybody who's.

Uh, has that, or, or unhealthy behaviors can actually start the process of recovery by, by slowly moving to healthy behaviors and healthy habits. So that's the way I think about it in a nutshell.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I love that. And to me, that's kind of the core of behavioral health, which is that we can change habits and by changing our habits, we can change our brain pathways.

One thing though, that I do think is important to recognize is that weaken the. Brain pathways to, um, behaviors that we're trying to undo or change, but we can't delete them.

CVA says,

**Rebecca Williams:** right.

**Yael Schonbrun:** there's no delete button in the brain, but by strengthening new pathways, healthier pathways, more value, consistent [00:18:00] pathways, um, we sort of increase their power and decrease the power of the unhealthy ones. So I think that idea that we can modify our brain, make it healthier by practices that. the ones that you described in your books? Um, that's a very empowering idea. It's not easy. takes effort and practice. Um, but it is, uh, an empowering concept.

**Rebecca Williams:** Right. And it's really just a matter of being expert at the problem. So if the problem is unhealthy, Habits. Um, there's so many books out right now that talk about, um, changing habits. And so you kind of have to read up and learn how to change habits and it's going to happen. It does take time. Uh, I'm reading now atomic habits by James clear, which I really love.

And it really talks that it's just small changes can make a huge difference. And I think that kind of helps everybody feel better and it does work really well. Small changes.

**Yael Schonbrun:** . wanted to start diving into some of the specific modules that you go through in your book. Um, and one of the areas that you

**Rebecca Williams:** Mmm.

**Yael Schonbrun:** is, is [00:19:00] how we deal with emotions. And one important point is that we can change. The pathways in our brain, but what we can't change is the human experience, right?

We're going to have uncomfortable emotions and for people with a history of addiction who may also have a history of trauma, or who may be dealing with ongoing stressors, there are going to be really uncomfortable, painful, big emotions that are hard to tolerate. And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about how

**Rebecca Williams:** He

**Yael Schonbrun:** help

struggling with addiction relate differently to emotions. Can you explain this transformative idea that you write about in your book that your feelings don't have to change for you to be okay?

**Rebecca Williams:** Oh, can I repeat that? That is even when you just said that I just kind of calmed down. I felt more relaxed here. It is. Your feelings do not have to change for you to be okay. You are already okay. So cool. That's good to know. Um, this is a radical thought, um, that [00:20:00] feelings are real, but Hey, the key here is that feelings are temporary.

Now that's a huge thing for patients to understand and know about that feelings themselves are temporary. We like to teach folks that cravings are not commands. Cravings are not commands. So folks don't have to forcefully change their feelings. Um, they just have to be aware of their feelings the way I think about it.

It's like taking a bird's eye view of, um, their emotions and thoughts, getting out of the stickiness of emotions and noticing what's going on without attaching to any particular emotions or thoughts and, and keeping your feet on the ground. I'm saying. Yes, I'm already. Okay. And emotions are normal things.

We all have them. Then it's, that's the way things are going to be. You're going to have emotions. Um, in our book, we also have a long list of false beliefs about emotions, because I think folks get really bogged down in, [00:21:00] um, really strong, false beliefs about particular motions. For example. Here's I have false belief.

If I let myself grieve, I will be sad forever. Now that is a very intense feeling. Just like you said earlier, very intense. However, um, it may not be a hundred percent accurate, so we try to teach folks, um, to label their false beliefs and begin to replace them with more realistic beliefs. For example.

Grieving is a normal part of loss. I can move through this and to really reengage with their center and their sense of resiliency.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, I love that. And I'll just sort of go back to another quote that you include in your book from Jack Kornfeld, which is you can't stop the waves. But you can learn to surf. And again, your book really teaches some of the skills for learning to surf. One of them being thought challenging or, or, you know, replacing, uh, inaccurate thoughts with more accurate ones or just relating differently to [00:22:00] whatever thoughts you're

**Rebecca Williams:** She.

**Yael Schonbrun:** And I wonder actually, if you can walk us through the embracing the dog metaphor that you include in your book, because I think that is a really nice way to conceptualize both, you know, relating differently to emotions, to thoughts, and even to behaviors.

**Rebecca Williams:** Sure that Julie Craft, my coauthor wrote that piece of it. And it's really fun because, um, she has a dog and it was really about just, um, the, the, the constant, um, barking and bothering of what a dog can do and just. Really getting your mind. And so what, the way she thought about it in the way we thought about it is that instead of fighting that, um, that, that, um, dog that's in the room to actually embrace the dog and to, uh, just find out what the dog needs and provide that for the, the actual dialogue.

So it's just a, kind of a fun metaphor for trying to, instead of fighting everything is to actually embrace it and, and to be at peace [00:23:00] with that kind of. Jumpy dog that

**Yael Schonbrun:** yeah. Yeah. And just to sort of contextualize it even a step further, The description of this dog is that it's, it's a dog that you didn't ask for, but that just kind of takes



residents in your house and you have options in how you respond to it. You can try to push it out the door, but if it keeps coming back and you keep pushing it out the door, you just end up in this ceaseless battle with this creature that is annoying you. if you sort of, you know, make

**Rebecca Williams:** Okay.

**Yael Schonbrun:** it, give it some comfort, give it some food without paying overly much attention to it. You can develop a more. Friendly relationship with it and learn to coexist, right? Cause if it's not going to leave, your options for getting it out, the door are not available, but instead you can learn to live with it in a more peaceable way.

And I actually it's very similar or parallel to the metaphor of the crying baby that acceptance and commitment therapy practitioners use that, [00:24:00] which are the Gaia love. Um, Described on an episode, we had about couples relationships, where if a baby is crying and you kind of push it away, tends to cry louder, and you're really not giving it what it needs, but if you hold it close and figure out what it is that it's looking for, then it's much more likely to be soothed.

And, um, you can again develop a more peaceful relationship with that, with that small child.

**Rebecca Williams:** yes. Wonderfully said that's so cool.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I also love the concrete ideas that you offer for what to do in the face of, um, discomfort and sort of uncertainty about what to do. I mentioned earlier, you draw on dialect. Well behavior therapy, notions and skills in treating addiction, including opposite action exercise.

And I thought this was a really cool to offer this exercise. So I wonder if you can explain how you might guide a patient who's struggling with enormous guilt or shame, or even with depression or loneliness through this opposite action exercise.

**Rebecca Williams:** sure. Yeah. Upset action is [00:25:00] very fun to do within a therapy session and I'm sure everybody's doing tele-health now, so it's definitely can translate into, um, Telemedicine and telehealth. Um, so here's how it works. Most people have an automatic response to guilt or shame. They usually, um, dwell on it. They beat themselves up, or of course use drugs or alcohol to kind of combat, um, guilt or shame.

So what we do is we teach patients to stop before they go down that well worn path, um, and choose the opposite action. So instead of dwelling on guilt, um, or using around guilt, we teach folks how to figure out specifically what part, um, they may have in the situation. So. Um, we try to unpackage it and be in the room with guilt and shame, which are difficult emotions to have.

Um, and as well as depression and sadness, the same thing can happen. Um, some [00:26:00] folks who feel depression and sadness are on autopilot, uh, to a behavior that is probably not healthy, for example, like eating too much or staying on the couch all day. Um,

so we asked folks to identify the opposite. Action, which, um, they can, which might be, they can learn and make one healthy new recipe a week.

Or they may like, I've been doing a lot going outside for a walk and what other people are doing right now and being of service to others. So instead of. Dwelling in the difficult and sometimes painful emotions to actually do the opposite behaviourally and, um, explore that and see what happens there.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, I love that. Cause it's sort of, I think sometimes when we have big emotions, it can be. Hard to figure out what to do other than follow it. And sometimes people turn to substances to quell it because that sort of lack of a sense of [00:27:00] what, what else can I do? I hope it's okay for me to put you on the spot, but I am kind of curious.

What, what would you, how would you counsel somebody who was struggling with. Big anger right now. So somebody, witnessing, you know, all the brutality that's been happening and, the frustration of not being able to make a difference in the world. How would you counsel them opposite action or one of the other exercises in, managing those thoughts and feelings in healthy ways instead of turning to substances.

**Rebecca Williams:** Yeah, that is really, you know, that's really important question. Hey, anger is my favorite emotion, , I guess, cause I'm from the Bronx New York and, uh, I just, I'm not afraid of anger per se. It's not one of those feelings I run away from. I actually bring it into the room when I'm working with people. Um, I really am more curious about it, then I'm fearful of it. So, um, and [00:28:00] anger is a huge part of addiction and, and, and also recovery.

Uh, so that's the first of all, honor honor the anger. Um, that's to me very important to actually like unpackage it, figure out what exactly is going on underneath it. And it's real because there's a lot going on right now. And people are agitated, angry, rape rageful, actually.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Rebecca Williams:** so I, I really want to, um, Spend time with it.

I don't want to sugar coat it or sweep it under the rug in terms of what's going on right now in society. Um, there are serious challenges, however, um, We have to decide what is going to be the best action, um, for, for anger. Now, sometimes it's going to be opposite actions. So in other words, instead of, um, potentially aggressively going out and, um, [00:29:00] being, um, agitated in a protest, for example, that may or may not work.

The other, the other opposite action for that is I care about it's my value to care about the community. I care about people, maybe I'm giving to a cause that helps people, um, elevate themselves. For example, one of my favorite, um, organizations is called a better chance. It takes kids from inner cities and gives them scholarships to.

Uh, elite prep schools across the country. And from there, they prepare to go to, um, top colleges across the country. So I may need to move from agitation to action, the action that

makes the most sense for me. So everybody's different. Um, and this is a tough time, but that's one way I think about how to kind of walk the path of anger and find out where you can go from a values based perspective.

[00:30:00] **Yael Schonbrun:** I love that because you're including a lot of the skills that we've already talked. About, and again, there's, there's many more, but it's, start with mindfulness and making space, attention non-judgmentally to what that emotion is. Telling you and, and honoring it as, And I think that is such an important place to begin. And what you're saying is that the anger can be activating in a positive way, but that it tends to be more positive. If we're clear on, if we. and clarify for ourselves what it is that is most important to us. but of course individuals lost in addiction can have a hard time connecting with core values. So I wonder if you can actually offer up some tips folks who may have a hard time getting in touch with their values .

**Rebecca Williams:** sure. Yeah. Values are everything. I mean, in terms of moving in, in a action oriented way, that's going to be the most healing for your heart. So one of the, um, exercises we have in our workbook is called. Uncover your [00:31:00] values and we, Oh, we go over 14 value categories, similar to what you guys do and act. We talk about, um, the value categories of family work, financial faith, sobriety, friendship, intimate relationships, health, community, and others.

Um, so we, we actually have the client, um, kind of rate. What's their most important value, um, or top three values. Um, we want them to rank order the values and to figure out what's important right now. In other words, um, in the present moment, similar to the mindfulness, uh, direction that we have. And then we have the clients go back and identify what the value means for them.

So for example, if it is community, um, if that's the highest ranking one right now, we explore what that means and how they would like to spark this value in recovery. So now that their folks are in recovery or early [00:32:00] recovery, what, what is going to spark, um, moving into, into community for that person? We want to know, uh, what actions they have taken in the past.

Um, that show that the value is important to them. We want to know what actions they would like to take today. To focus on the value of community. Um, so we really want to get a sense of their self efficacy from experiencing positive community interactions in the past and how that's elevated them. And, um, we want them to focus also on the present moment.

And if folks get off course. Oh, which everybody does with regard to values, what actions can the client or patient take to get them back in line with what is most important for them? So constantly reviewing values, figuring out what's the what's the top ranked ones are, and really unpacking, um, what worked in the past and where we will want to go today to [00:33:00] reengage that particular value.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, I think that is important to just, um, validate that everyone gets off course with values because those emotions can really cause us to act in ways that that are less mindful and less consistent with who we want to be in the world, because they're so

powerful. Um, and I really love that example of. You know, if anger is sort of telling you like my community and standing up for my community and standing up for the safety of my fellow human beings is so important to me that you can sort of pause and ask yourself what are the most value consistent and effective ways that I can act in this moment.

Recognizing that, you know, from time to time, you may go off course, but you can always pause and come back to asking yourself that question. I actually, I will link to that, um, organization that you mentioned. Cause that sounds like a really, really wonderful one.

**Rebecca Williams:** I'm a graduate of that organization. So I.

**Yael Schonbrun:** right?

**Rebecca Williams:** A fondness in my heart for a better chance. Yes. Um, went from, you know, [00:34:00] the, you know, growing up in the Bronx, received a full scholarship to a boarding school in Boston. And, uh, the rest is fabulous, uh, with a lot of hard work, but yeah, I'm a big fan, big fan.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Oh, that's an inspiration story.

I also wanted to talk a bit about grief, which I really think is tied to anger, , you discussed grief a lot in your mindfulness workbook, and I, I wonder if you can speak a little bit to why grief is so important to look at in the context of healing addiction.

**Rebecca Williams:** Yeah, thanks for bringing that up. I really, really, um, Want to unpack grief a bit. The reason why both of our books focus on grief and loss is because we didn't see anyone researching or talking about loss and the impact loss has on addiction and the impact of addiction can have on more losses. So, um, we really, Julie, my coauthor and I really spent a lot of time talking about [00:35:00] loss and grief.

Now, for me personally, similar to other psychologists who study and have, and practice in the area that is familiar to them. I came to this on a more personal note, um, myself, uh, for me, my mother experienced so much loss in her life, even before I was born. Um, she managed her pain and grief. By using alcoholics smoking a ton of cigarettes.

Um, so growing up, I knew there was something wrong, but losses were never discussed in my household. And people don't really want to talk about losses,

**Yael Schonbrun:** yeah,

**Rebecca Williams:** Right. So, um,

**Yael Schonbrun:** it's so painful. So we, we, we want to push pain under the rug so that we're not so uncomfortable.

**Rebecca Williams:** exactly. And that's what happened too in my family and probably a lot of other families. And, uh, however, um, the consequence of pushing it under the rug, like you said, is that, um, behavior start coming up that are [00:36:00] trying to. It's like soothe the

grief and the loss. Um, but those behaviors, at least in my experience tend to be, um, or for my family was addiction.

So, um, it it's all intertwined and I really wanted to unpack it. And so that's kind of my journey to get to this. Idea of really understanding the importance of loss in addiction. So, um, my many patients struggle with many losses. I mean, working at the hospital, there was, um, folks who had multiple losses from.

Um, being in the military, uh, and having losses coming out of that as well as in private, my private practice, multiple losses. And we even have a checklist in our book. We have a lot of checklists because there's so many losses that folks don't even think about, you know, um, even, uh, if you move for example, and you lose all your friends when your family moves to another location, folks that, Oh [00:37:00] my God, that's right.

I lost. All of my friends. So, um, that's why I'm talking about losses and going through checklists and understanding what personally were the losses that your clients have had is extremely helpful. And especially now, There's so many losses that are going on in our society, not just, um, um, a loss of health that some people are feeling, but actually loss of loved ones.

There's loss of mental health. I'm super concerned about the frontline mental health and medical workers. Of course, there's a loss of fairness. There's a loss of justice. Um, so we urge folks to reclaim their center point, um, and honor the losses, talk about them in therapy and, um, navigate through so that you have new ways to cope with losses that don't have to do with drugs and using drugs and addiction.

Um, again,

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Well, [00:38:00] and I'll just add to that. I think that some of the times the losses can be. much smaller, but you still feel them. Right. So loss of freedom to go out a restaurant or loss, I mean, which is very, very small, but of help to take care of your kids, loss of ability to interact with coworkers or loss of free time.

Right. Because we're home and always working in parenting. If you are a working parent. On top of that, I think sometimes we can make ourselves feel guilty for feeling the discomfort of the loss. We can say things to ourselves. Like I. Shouldn't it shouldn't be struggling so much, you know, other people have it worse.

And then we can sort of shame ourselves which contributes to the pain that we experienced. So the loss can be really big and obvious, like the loss of a family member. And obviously that needs to be honored, but sometimes even the smaller losses need a little bit of our attention to, and certainly they need our nonjudgmental awareness because as [00:39:00] you're noting, it really can lead to. Propulsion to use the loss and sometimes unhealthy ways with addictive substances or addictive behaviors.

**Rebecca Williams:** Yeah, that's so true. I mean, I, I went out to a restaurant for the first time for my birthday, uh, here in, um, Georgia. And, um, I told them. It was an intense

experience. I was so surprised I was almost in tears. And then I told my friend, Hey, I went out to a restaurant for the first time in 10 weeks. And she started crying.

**Yael Schonbrun:** mm.

**Rebecca Williams:** mean, we're just talking about going out to eat lunch. Um, it was really pretty intense and powerful. So yes, the, the, the energy around the loss of not being able to go outside and not, um, you know, being able to connect is, is profound.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. Yeah. And then I wonder too, if it's okay for me to, again, put you on the spot and, and just share a little bit more about your personal journey. So you were talking about how [00:40:00] your mother, you witnessed your mother using substances and cigarettes to sooth her own losses. And I'm just curious for you, how did your awareness of the connection between loss and addiction come and then how did you, how did you sort of take that. As a part of your journey into treating addictive disorders.

**Rebecca Williams:** Yeah, that's a really good question. I definitely knew something was wrong in my household. Um, aside from normal growing up stuff, I knew there was a deep, deep divide between my mother's functioning and myself. And so I, I really started studying. Psychology in high school to really the basics really just kind of figure out what, um, just what's going on.

Why are there, why is this, why is it distressed so intense? Um, And, um, luckily I was able to, um, have good mentors and good teachers to [00:41:00] actually move me along in the field of psychology. And I went to college and majored in psychology, four more years of trying to figure things out and learn, um, master's degree also in, in psychology to really fine tune my understanding of, um, loss and, uh, And grief.

And you know, of course the, the PhD program is another way another venue to really unpackage, um, mental health conditions and how they impact, um, addiction. So a lot of the journey is just really. They, you know, month by month in school, just unpackaging what, um, what's what works for people to be well and what doesn't work, frankly, I have to admit that doing, I've been doing yoga for 35 years.

And, um, it has saved my life and in my mental health, because when [00:42:00] things were unbalanced, I was able to reflect back on my yoga practice or, or complete yoga. And I've taught yoga for 20 years also. So not only just, you know, being a student, but also being a teacher, keeps me in the game. Um, so that was another way to actually balance my mind, calm down and be able to understand, but the journey of, of mental recovery and addiction recovery,

**Yael Schonbrun:** that's such a powerful story and in the way of turning suffering into meaning, and I'm constantly thinking about that there's um, many people have, I'm sure heard of this book or Reddit, Viktor Frankl's man's search for meaning and. love this idea that when we encounter suffering that one of the most meaningful things we can do is, is turn it into a path towards healing and helping others.

And it sounds like that's really what you did, which is I think just inspirational.

**Rebecca Williams:** Thank you.

**Yael Schonbrun:** So [00:43:00] talk a little bit about some of the common social problems that I think are really important to discuss right now. Right. There's sort of like a lot of the worldwide social problems. And then, then also the social problems that occur. Inside of the confines of our homes, where many of us are trapped.

I kind of think of quarantine and what's going on in the world at large is like just this pressure cooker, this interpersonal pressure cooker. And, and so I think that, you know, whatever social problems exist naturally are just. Exponentially greater during this time period of quarantine and, racial injustice coming to the coming to light more. Um, you talk a lot about common social problems in your book. What do you see as some of the most common social problems that interfere with recovery from addiction?

**Rebecca Williams:** and I would say right now the most common social problems is loneliness and isolation. Um, there's a lot. Oh, social problems that we can unpack, but I do want to focus a minute [00:44:00] on how, um, how we are a social being. And right now most of us, um, are really just, um, uh, on our own with our own mind in her own home with our clutter, with our children, you know, that are also having their own struggles.

So, um, there's a sense of loneliness. However, um, I do think there's an opportunity in that loneliness to kind of really reflect on who we are and what our narrative is personally, and how to move forward. I don't think we're doing that enough in, in, you know, in the social realm cause the, the screens are one dimensional, but I do think this is a real time to get a little more, um, personal with ourselves in terms of.

Addiction and recovery, obviously AA, an N a alcoholics anonymous and narcotics anonymous are [00:45:00] extremely helps, have been helpful for people for decades. Now, folks can't go to their AA or NA meetings in person. So to break isolation and loneliness, uh, there are AA meetings online, which is really important and folks should be reaching out to their sponsors, mentors, friends.

In recovery. Um, so, uh, the most important piece is, is a twofold thing. One is to understand yourself with self awareness and self compassion. And the second thing is to begin to break the isolation. In a very thoughtful way, um, in terms of recovery from addiction and really, um, take that extra step to, to connect with someone who has made also be struggling with social isolation and early recovery from addiction.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, so it is harder to reach out and connect with people, but I [00:46:00] think you're pointing to resources that can take advantage of. And you know, the fact that online meetings are taking place is a resource that people can take advantage of.

And I think that's really important for folks to know.

**Rebecca Williams:** Were you thinking of some other social problems that, that we're, we're bumping up against right now?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. So I do a lot of couples therapy and I, I think that you can be in the house with others as you're mentioning with your kids or with your partner. And if there's a tension between you and others who you're with that can be a real pressure cooker and can drive people to say, you know, I don't have an outlet or a nonjudgmental person to chat with about how it is that I'm feeling.

And then. Substances become an easy way to sooth, whatever it is that you're feeling, because it feels like you don't have anywhere else to turn. And I think, you know, even outside of addictive substances, I think people across the gamut are really experiencing that, that we're uncomfortable. In our homes, we're feeling kind of [00:47:00] trapped.

We're feeling pretty stressed out we're looking for soothing. So many people are turning to, you know, carbohydrates and snacks or, um, you know, binging out on TV, just to kind of check out of the discomfort that they're feeling. Um, you know, and then, uh, certainly turning to alcohol or other drugs, um, to get that sense of soothing because you know, we're feeling so, um, uncomfortable in the relationships that we have accessible to us.

And. Unable to access the ones that might be more soothing.

**Rebecca Williams:** Yeah, you make a really good point about being in isolation with somebody, your partner, her, uh, and family. And, um, what works for me is, is kind of to step up the self care stuff, to step up the, the meditation, um, the, the home yoga practice, the solo walking, if you can get outside in nature, uh, and to really, um, kind of activate that.

Self care piece. That's so important. And actually to me, that the [00:48:00] self compassion piece in a relationship is really important too. Believe it or not. So in a relationship to have compassion for yourself to treat yourself, um, like your best friend would treat you, and if you're going through a rough patch with your partner to say, Hmm, that's, you're going through a rough patch.

It's okay. Stay in the game. It's going to be all right. Um, so yeah. Thanks.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, I've told, I've told all my patients and talk to a lot about this with colleagues and friends, that self compassion is something that I've been turning to more and more during this difficult time period, because it's one of the few things that really is reliably available is that kindness that you can send to yourself, that sense of common humanity, that we're all.

Struggling a lot right now. And then that ability to just kind of be mindful of whatever it is that you're experiencing with, you know, openness and nonjudgmental in this making space for it. So I think that is a really powerful tool that we can always turn to, which, which makes it really [00:49:00] powerful when not a lot of other things aren't available.

**Rebecca Williams:** right. Absolutely.

Yeah.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I do love that you take this million dollar question head on of what is the best time to start recovery. So we're talking about addiction and recovery during a very



intense time in the world. Um, and some people might say, you know, now's not the best time because there's few. There, there are, there is such challenge to coping well, right?

Because the world has gotten so restricted so difficult. So what, what is your, and Julie's answer to this important question of when is the best time to start recovery?

**Rebecca Williams:** well, I think we have a million dollar answer to your question. Your brain would like to start today. Your brain is, is, is that, um, incredible computer up there that is really working so hard to try to make sense of everything and file everything and put everything in it. Place. However, um, [00:50:00] as we mentioned earlier, it needs new pathways and it needs pathways of wellness and healing.

And, um, again and again, repetitively to really return to some healthy behaviors and healthy healing activities. Um, it's that ability to choose that is going to be your best friend right now. So being able to choose wellness, resiliency, Self awareness, self compassion during these difficult times. Um, instead of choosing, you know, the autopilot of checking out and numbing out with drugs or alcohol or, um, uh, harmful behaviors is gonna hold you for the long haul.

So the answer to the question of when is the best time to start today,

**Yael Schonbrun:** Well, and I wonder if you can offer, um, A GoTo practice for, for managing stress that might come [00:51:00] up as we turn towards recovery. As we turn towards beginning the journey into health today, are some things? What, what is sort of like one go to practice that you recommend for people who, who sort of imagine a anticipate a pretty difficult road ahead with trying to change those behaviors?

**Rebecca Williams:** Yeah, I keep falling back to what you just mentioned and what we talked about a moment ago. Number one, honor, where we are and what is happening right now. It is happening and we must be in the present moment with it. My personal go to practice for myself is self compassion. Um, we talked a little bit about what self compassion is.

It's just that hand on the shoulder to say, Hey. It's okay. You're going to make it through this. Um, treat yourself well today. Give yourself something enjoyable and healthy. That's gonna sustain you for today. And it could [00:52:00] be just, um, taking a moment with the computer off and the television off. Um, the lights are off and you close your eyes.

You're laid down and you put a cold compress on your forehead, and that may be what you need today. And that's, self-compassion where you give yourself what you need. Um, there are going to be tough times, um, and you have the mental resources to get through this. I like to say to myself, um, what is the most loving thing to do right now?

Uh, and I actually act on that. I kind of take a moment. I breathe. I asked myself when I'm stressed, I asked myself, what is the most loving thing to do for yourself right now? And I actually just walked down the path and do that. So, um, we talked about ways to, um, folk refocus on breathing, um, inhaling and [00:53:00] exhaling is really just the beginning.

Part of the answer to that question. Um, and for your patients that are managing relapse right now, I really, you know, recommend to have your patients ask themselves what is the most loving thing to do right now?

**Yael Schonbrun:** yeah. This kind of reminds me of a recommendation that came from a non therapist in a book. I just read untamed by Glennon

**Rebecca Williams:** Okay.

**Yael Schonbrun:** fun book and pretty inspirational. was a great read. And she talks about creating sort of a, a spreadsheet for yourself with two columns. One is, the first column is easy.

So things that you do to soothe yourselves that are easy, but that tend to this vicious cycle for you. Things like. Engaging in unsafe sex or, um, turning to substances or, eating too much spending too much money. So that kind of falls into the easy category where, [00:54:00] you know, you'll feel better in the short term, but that there'll be. Bigger problems down the road as a result of engaging in those behaviors. And then the second column is a reset column. So these are behaviors that help to soothe you in the moment. They might be a little bit harder, but they reset you on a path of health and healing and some of the. that you just mentioned would fit in under that.

So a mindful walk or breathing or feeling your connection to the earth. one of the recommendations that I often give patients is making them available to yourself when you're not in a craving period, because when those emotions are big or when you're sort of feeling short fuse, it can be harder to generate those ideas of what you can do, the healthy activities.

And so really engaging in some brainstorming when you're feeling calm and a little bit, more open to generating ideas can be a helpful strategy as well.

**Rebecca Williams:** that's a great idea to have that column, that they [00:55:00] had, that the checklist

**Yael Schonbrun:** No.

**Rebecca Williams:** column to set yourself up. The other thing I really love is, um, daily affirmations. I think this was kind of popular in the eighties. And I was like, yeah, this is great. And, and it kind of went away and now it's, I feel like it's back again.

Um, I love daily affirmations. In fact, our book, the gift of recovery has 365 daily affirmations. Um, to say out, I recommend folks say them out loud, record them in their phone, say them to themselves, play back the recordings, uh, five to 10 times throughout the day. I mean, to hear your own voice. Give yourself a positive message of affirmation in recovery is, is extremely powerful.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, I loved the affirmations that you offer in your book. And I love the recommendation to put them in your phone and have your phone remind you of them, because then they become more an integral part of your day. and I'll just sort of read one of

my favorites because, um, [00:56:00] I do think that engaging these almost as like mantras can be really helpful.

So the small stuff seems big, I can change my perspective. I can bring it back to its actual size. I mean, that's just one of the, examples of accepting everyday frustration and changing perspective. Um, but there's a whole host of them. So for example, another example is even my strongest feelings in recovery.

Are not permanent. And again, programming them into your phone and reminding yourself of them is such a terrific way to sort of, um, keep your mind on a healing path. I wanted to end by asking you what kind of tips you offer individuals who love somebody who's struggling with addiction or who loves somebody who's early in their recovery to integrate their mindfulness, um, in supportive, loving ways.

**Rebecca Williams:** yes, such a good question. Um, number one. Try not to fix the other person. Uh, you know, I know there's like a real rush to fix and change and make, make different another [00:57:00] person, but really the, for the person who loves someone in recovery, the healing is an inside job. It really is about how you're going to be, what your narrative is, how, what you choose every day to be well and resilient, no matter what is going on, because you need to do that anyway to be well.

So as long as the person who loves another person, recovery is working on them, their own healing. I do think that, um, there's a pathway to engage in, in, um, in maintaining. Being well, um, over, over the long haul, because recovery from addiction is a long journey. It's not a one fix and done. So you really have to think about this as, um, working training yourself to be well, um, for the long haul.

So, um, I do think, I do think meditation and mindfulness is helpful for the loved one. Um, uh, I do think. The psychotherapy or tele [00:58:00] mental health is helpful for the loved one. And one of my biggest things that I think is kind of cool too, to think about is when you're doing therapy with a loved one of someone who's, um,

**Yael Schonbrun:** Cool.

**Rebecca Williams:** uh, either actively using or in early recovery.

Um, I liked the fact of the patient teaching the therapist. A mindfulness technique. In other words, um, you know, The patient can actually learn techniques on their own or come back and, and the, the therapist can teach the technique to the patient. But the key in terms of, um, understanding from the heart is, and it's fun too, is to have your patient teach you.

A mindfulness skill or a meditation skill in the tele mental health experience. So Hey, give it a try. It's kind of cool. And, um, it's something that the [00:59:00] person who is, is a loved one can actually hold as they're very young. Um, Hey, I taught my therapist this today. Um, it's pretty neat.

**Yael Schonbrun:** and that mimics, I think a lot of the themes that we talked about that I talked about with, in a previous episode, where we talked about, um, family approaches to

dealing with addiction uh, and I love that saying that he, uh, healing from addiction is an inside job that belongs to the person who is trying to change their behaviors, but we can act in loving and supportive ways that.

That are, um, us taking care of ourselves, mindfully, lovingly towards ourselves and supportively towards the other. thank you so much, Rebecca, for joining us,

**Rebecca Williams:** yeah. Thank you so much for inviting me. It was really fun. I really enjoyed it. You're you're a great podcast.

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