

Mindful Return with Lori Mihalich-Levin

Lori Mihalich-Levin: [00:00:00]for me, it's making that intentional, like carve out of time. Like right now, I'm going to decide to be mom for the next 15 minutes. Then you're not downstairs or wherever feeling guilty about being mom, because you've just made a decision to be mom.

Then you can turn that off and do a transition ritual and come back , into work. And I think those pauses and spaces are so much warmer, important now, and are really helpful when you're navigating that transition to how am I a working professional in this world? And also a mom. That was Lori Mahalick live in on psychologists off the clock.

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Yael Schonbrun: From coast to coast. I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and [00:01:00] assistant professor at Brown University.

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Yael Schonbrun: is Al here with Debbie to introduce an episode where I interviewed Lori Maholick live in the founder of a company called mindful return that helps working parents navigate parental leave and return and, and sort of the early period of having young children while still working and. One thing that I just wanted to point out about the relevance of this interview is that all working parents are really struggling right now.

In fact, the demands of COVID have disproportionately been affecting women and working parents and early on in the pandemic, I. I started thinking about how parallel this pandemic and the effects are to the first year of having a new baby. in, in the beginning.

When you have a new baby, you think I can do this? Like, it's really hard right now, but it'll get [00:03:00] easier. You kind of have that sort of initial adrenaline rush of getting through the difficult period. And then a couple months in you realize. The new normal is not going to be like the old normal. And so the fatigue and the overwhelm are gonna probably just be accompanying you for a good bit of time.

And then I remember in the first year of all, three of my kids' lives, like towards the end of that first year, I just kinda got to this point of kind of hopelessness and desperation and just. Unending fatigue. And I kind of think that's where many of us are at. And so for that reason, I think a lot of the strategies that Lori talks about in this episode are just really, really helpful because they're really on the ground things that you can do in the moment, even when you're feeling pulled in a million directions and feeling really tired.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. I mean, well, first of all, I just want to add that I've made that same parallel about how it does feel like having a newborn baby all over again, because you're in the house so much. There's no breaks. You're just. Tired and overwhelmed so much. I think [00:04:00] being home with the kids all the time, , it's kind of like a similar experience. So I just wanted to echo that I had the same, the same feeling.

Um, I think so I loved what she had to say. I think it was really helpful, practical information. I think the thing that really resonated for me is about planning and I'm not really a natural planner. I would say, like, I'm not great at meal planning.

I don't always plan out my time super well, but some of her ideas I thought were really helpful and inspiring to me. And there were a lot of great ones

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah.

For me, there is kind of two different sections that really. Are important to be more attentive to. And the first is just connection community. Cause I think like having a very

young child, this is such an isolating time. I mean, literally we are, you know, encouraged to refrain from contact with other people.

And so it can feel really overwhelmingly lonely. And so I think reaching out to people flexibly, um, in ways that feel [00:05:00] as effective as possible, given the limitations is really important.

Debbie Sorensen: Yeah. And if you have, and to be a parent, who's struggling in the pandemic, we can link on the show notes for today to these. Like support groups for other, with other parents that you can do online, that might be super helpful for folks. So we'll link to that as well. And also, you know, the resources that our guests have are phenomenal.

Yael Schonbrun: absolutely. The other thing that has been really important for me, just because of the overwhelm is that I had in, in the earlier part of the pandemic really stopped taking. Breaks. And, and I really start to kind of fray at the edges when I don't.

And so taking those mindful breaks and being realistic about what's actually possible is really important. And she gave a recommendation that I'll just echo, which is to use an app called insight timer. It's one of my favorite apps because it's very, very flexible so using technology and tools, but in whatever way, makes sense for you just taking a [00:06:00] quick break and it really can just be a minute or two long to just pause.

So we hope that you get a lot out of this episode and that some of these tools help you, make it through the latter part of the year of the pandemic and that some of these strategies even helped you perhaps enjoy the holiday and feel connected to yourself and to love the ones Lori Mihalich-Levin is the founder of mindful return and the mindful return online course she's author of back to work after baby. She's a healthcare partner in a global law firm, cohost of the parents at work podcast and mom of two red-headed boys.

Her passion is helping new parents develop strategies and tools so that they can be present both with their babies and in their careers. And her work has appeared in the New York times, parenting the Washington post thrive global and the Huffington post. Welcome Lori.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Oh, it's so good to be here. Yeah.

Thanks for having me. Oh, I was

Yael Schonbrun: so excited to have you. So Lori and I were just chatting before I started the recording that week. [00:07:00] been following each other's work for some time, , but you actually founded mindful return in 2014.

And what's so cool about this story. And I want, I want there, have you talked a little bit about it is that you founded mindful return while you were a full time working parent? With two small boys that were then age is one and three. And I wonder if you can share what motivated you to take on such a huge project at a time when most parents are just like trying to survive the day.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: It's crazy what we do when we have no time.

Yael Schonbrun: Um,

Lori Mihalich-Levin: I think for me it was the sense of absolute desperation and. Wishing that there were resources. I could have availed myself of in the transition back to work after having a baby that would have been thoughtful around the identity transition of becoming a working parents.

And that weren't just silly advice that I could find on the internet. Like. Don't put a picture of your baby on your desk and Oh, you [00:08:00] might leak on your shirt. Like that's pretty much all I could find at the time, back in 2014. And, um, you know, I, I started mindful return when my oldest son was two and my youngest was about 11 months and I didn't view it as a huge undertaking at the time because I didn't really know what I was getting myself into.

I just said, there's a gap and I really want to fill it. And what can I do? I also had the sense that. While I was living, it was the best time to create it because I could speak from a position of like being in the trench as opposed to reflecting back on the trench a few years later. So I'm glad that I dedicated the time to it when I did.

Yael Schonbrun: And I mean, you've written too that there's this leaky pipeline of women professionals, two thirds of women. Returned to work after having a child, meaning one third, do not. And I know your experience of how hard it was really speaks to that. But what do you understand as being the main problems in companies retaining women in the workplace after kiddos and the picture?

Lori Mihalich-Levin: I [00:09:00] think there are many, I think one is that so many people don't think about it as. As a really challenging transition and one for which an employee might need some support. Right. It was just like, okay, you're back. You're who you were and just move on.

And I don't think that's the reality for most people who become a working parent. , there are a lot of, I think, Biases, obviously they're well-documented motherhood penalties in the workplace. There's the button chair bias for sure. Formerly, perhaps prior to COVID really looked down upon anyone who wasn't sitting in the office for the normal office hours, which is really challenging, right.

When you're a new parent, um, I also am never one to put sort of the onus on the working parent. And I think that there's a lot of internal dialogue that goes on for many of us that says this is never going to work. I don't know how I'm going to figure it out. So maybe I should. Um, and so I think. I have been on a mission [00:10:00] for the past six years to reframe that internal dialogue.

And I know you have as well to say, Hey, there are a lot of skills that I gained through working Parenthood that make me an amazing leader in my workplace and in my career. And I'm going to use those skills and PS, I didn't. Lose my ability to be a competent employee just because I went on parental leave.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. I love that. That's the emphasis of so much of your, your work, your writing your courses, because, and the research solidly backs that up. And that's something

that I write a lot about, which is this idea of work family enrichment that work family conflict exists, but right alongside it is this, construct that really.

Emphasizes how working can improve our parenting and how parenting can actually improve our skillset in the workplace. And I love that you talk about that, you know, even like at the leadership level, that women who are high up in a company get, can get stronger in particular ways and in very important [00:11:00] ways.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Can you just think about it from a perspective of like think of a couple of people or even just one person who you admire as a leader? Either in the country, in the world, in your workplace, I'm think of the skills that you most admire them for. Those are probably some of those things like empathy and problem solving.

And these are all things that we really build muscles on, on a daily basis and interacting with our small people in our life.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, one of the things in acceptance and commitment therapy, . The core construct that we're always aiming to build is psychological flexibility.

And, Oh my goodness. Do you have to be psychologically flexible when you're a parent? And it turns out that that helps, you know, your parenting, it helps your mental health, it helps your physical health, it helps you in the workplace. And I think you're exactly right. That when you think of employees or, you know, bosses or colleagues that you.

I really admire and all of it kind of comes down to, to psychological flexibility being effective in the moment in the space that you're at being able to [00:12:00] pivot when you need to and so on.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Yeah. Yeah. The great leaders are agile.

Right. And yeah. To navigate whatever comes their way, which, I mean this year, lots of stuff has come our way.

Yael Schonbrun: And what I love about your materials is that they are very like on the ground, like things that you can do, ways that you can get more connected. And I just want to sort of list that you, , address the skill of building in four distinct themes.

So developing a mindful mindset, Sort of working through logistics of return, building leadership and working Parenthood and then building and retaining community. And I want to talk about that each of those intern.

, but I wonder if you could just sort of share some favorites of your course of how is it that you managed to be at a law firm, you know, parenting your two boys during a pandemic, creating new content for your online course, and also retaining your sanity, which most of the time it looks like you do.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: I am riding the roller coaster with everyone. So there are good days and bad days, but generally speaking, I put a high [00:13:00] priority on the sanity piece. So

some of my favorite quotes twos, are at least during the pandemic, my husband and I have been very diligent about swapping alone time on weekends.

So I got three hours on Saturday. He gets three hours on Sunday and we go do whatever we want to do. And I use that time to journal and read and wander the neighborhood and weed. My vinca in the front yard. And, um, listen to your wonderful podcast. Well, I'm weeding. and just, you know, really carve out time.

For myself. there's one strategy that I developed when my babies were little that I still use every day in the shower, which, the story is that when I was really going off the rails with my son, the second child, and I couldn't find any time in my day. And I was just in a really dark place. I was told that it was helpful too.

For example, create an intention for my day. And then I was like, that's a great idea. I think I'll try it. And then three, four or five o'clock would roll around and I'd be like, gosh, yeah, I forgot to set the intention for the day. So [00:14:00] I came up with an acronym is I asked us which I started using the shower every morning.

And it stands for intention. So set an intention, whether the intention is go to bed at nine o'clock tonight because you're exhausted or finish that project because it's really plaguing you or repeat the mantra. I am enough today. , you know, I sat the intention while I'm in the shower and then the other two S's are stretch and saver and, you know, do a couple of yoga stretches in the shower.

, I have a yoga practice Before I get in the shower these days. So I don't combine that so much, but then saver, like, okay, so we're in COVID, but my house hasn't been bombed and I have enough food and my children are healthy and you know, like really I am now standing in hot water alone with no one attached to me and no one asking for anything for at least five minutes.

It's glorious. So I'm really just trying to focus on that gratitude while I'm in the shower.

Yael Schonbrun: I love that. And that I liked that you attach to the shower. Cause, um, you know, what we know about creating tiny habits [00:15:00] is that if we attach some of those habits to something that we already routinely do, it's a lot more likely to stick.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Yeah. Yeah. The other thing I'd say during COVID is that the sort of. Most dire, really dark place that I felt, , came before we managed to get away for a break on a vacation. And during the 10 days that we decided to unplug and go stay on a little Airbnb in the middle of nowhere for a little while. I think I realized how important those breaks and resets are.

And I know everybody's talking about, Oh, you've got to take a break. You got to take a break. No, really, really we need breaks and pauses particularly now. And the stress levels are so high. And so what my husband and I have done is to really like schedule in times when we know we're going to get away for a long weekend or when we know we're going to have a family member come and stay and help out for a week and, you know, manage and plan around those and make those the priority because we're not going to make it with our

sanity and tax for the end of this [00:16:00] academic year, if we don't, um, intentionally cause out, carve out those pauses for ourselves.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Yeah. And I would say too, that if you can't like physically get away, you know, finding ways to take like a mental vacation, the system in dialectical behavior therapy is one of those strategies for distress tolerance is taking a mental vacation or putting in a pause. You know, it doesn't have to be exactly meditation, but just taking some time peace in your day, even if it's very brief to sort of.

Check out unhook center, yourself breathe. Um, I think can be really important as just a regular practice.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: I had a leadership coach once who told me a story that finally convinced me that that was helpful. And her story was, you know, Remember what it feels like to be about to go on a and yet, you know, you're building off of the anticipation and you're so happy.

And like all the planning makes you happy and you get on [00:17:00] the plane and they're so happy. And then like, pretend you're going to the beach. Right. And then you get to the beach and while you're on the beach, you, you decide to check your email on the email, shows you all, all the things that are burning up at work and you spend your entire week.

On the beach in a tropical setting with beautiful Palm trees and sunshine, completely miserable because your head is back at work. And so that story to me, and I could totally relate to that. Really taught me that it doesn't so much matter where I physically am as, um, where my head is. Right. So now I go to the beach on a regular basis in my head away from COVID and it's pretty, you know, beautiful.

And I can smell the salt water and feel the breeze and all of that. Just sitting at my desk here.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. So, I mean, that's such a nice segue into talking about the first theme of your mindful return course, which is. Mindfulness. Right. but let me just ask you the broader question

um, but why is returning mindfully [00:18:00] so important?

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Because there, the alternative is that you're literally. Just trying to power through and you burn out really quickly and you're probably not sleeping. And, , returning on mindfully is creating a life of just a gigantic blur, I think, which you probably don't want to miss because you have a beautiful baby.

At home and you might love your job too, and want to engage with that job. So, yeah.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And, you go into defining what it is that mindfulness involves. And I love that you incorporate a lot of different elements of gratitude being present.

Gaining perspective, building compassion, feeling your feelings, committing to self care and, and you know, all of that of course requires you to sort of like be in the present moment. and I was going to ask you to describe some tiny steps for returning mindfully.

[00:19:00] **Lori Mihalich-Levin:** Yeah. Yeah. So I really try to focus on micro mindfulness for that returning to work stage, because I know how little margin you have in your day between caring for baby and being able to, um, manage a workload and navigate all the household responsibilities, et cetera. And so, um, all of the things that I am advocating for that I started doing myself are teeny tiny.

And so I guess, two other things other than the shower that I would recommend, um, One is. A daily gratitude practice in terms of like writing things down. Um, so when I had my second child, I actually started writing down three things every night that I was grateful for right before I went to bed. And, , I think it helped in a number of ways.

One. That's the time when I used to start ruminating about the list of things I didn't do and what needed to happen first the next morning. And it sort of shut down that, that mental turmoil and allowed me to fall asleep faster, which is so important when you have so little time to [00:20:00] sleep. , and it also helped me capture and record things about my baby and my growing child that I wouldn't have otherwise taken the time to write down, you know, as they start talking and the crazy things I say, and, you know, I've kept that.

Gratitude practice going for years now. And I've transitioned to using, um, a book called the five minute journal, which has a couple of prompts for the morning and a couple of, for the afternoon, and literally only takes five minutes. Um, and which I really love. And I love the concreteness of actually writing it down.

and the other strategy that is tiny, but is really about, um, taking a pause between home and between work. And you can do this. So when I was commuting and you know, I went on the Metro and then I had a little walk between, um, The Metro stop and my office when

Yael Schonbrun: I had some kind of time when we went to work,

Lori Mihalich-Levin: when we went to work.

Right, exactly. And I'll translate that to the COVID setting in a minute. But back when we went to work and some people do still, of course have to, you know, leave home. And one day we all will go back to the office. [00:21:00] Um, so I would stop off at either a park bench or a hotel lobby. And I turn on insight timer, which is my favorite mindfulness app.

Yael Schonbrun: I recommend it to everybody because it's free and hammer. They have guidance.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Yeah. And so I would turn that on and set it for five minutes, whether it was just, you know, the meditation bell with nothing playing, or if I wanted to listen to a five minute meditation, you can scroll, you can search by five minutes, you know, on insight timer.

And it was this wonderful way of being in a place where first of all, no one knew where I was, which was. Sort of, you know, glorious. , I was alone and anonymous and it enabled me to sort of take that pause and switch gears between being mom and home and whatever. And. Change into okay. Going into the office, going okay.

Or focus on work priorities before my day starts. And I think that type of pause is so important, even if it's, you know, at home, like we do it transition ritual with my kids. Whenever I go up to my office in my home to work. Now that I'm working from home, Our transition [00:22:00] ritual, which we adopted when the kids were little as hug kits, push, like they each gave us , one squeezey hug, one squeezey kiss, and then they push us, which is sort of funny because normally they're not allowed to push us, but in this instance they are.

And so then I go up to my office and just like, I have a little ritual in my office now of raising the blinds and turning on the lights and. It's, you know, a subset of my bedroom. So I make the bed and like, I just take that pause to be like, okay, now I am not being mom. And now I'm going to sit down at my computer and, you know, people are saying, well, What should I do when I'm working from home and I need to go down stairs to get a snack or a lunch or whatever, and then the baby sees me and then I'm off and running.

What should I do about that? And you know, for me, it's like, it's making that intentional, like carve out of time. Like right now, I'm going to decide to be mom for the next 15 minutes. Then you're not downstairs or wherever feeling guilty about being mom, because you've just made a decision to be mom. And now you can.

Then you can turn that off and do a transition ritual and come back and to, into work. And I [00:23:00] think those pauses and spaces are so much warmer, important now, and are really helpful when you're navigating that transition to how am I a working professional in this world? And also a mom. I

Yael Schonbrun: love that advice because so many of the boundaries around our roles have fallen away.

And so by building in these small rituals and they can be really quick, but if you do them with intentionality and with mindfulness, they can be really powerful. And I also wanted to share, as you were talking, I was remembering back to this interview that I conducted for my book project with an exotic dancer.

Right. And so if you're thinking about moving from being a parent to exotic dancing right in the home, you're sort of nurturing and sweet and connected and an exotic dancer, you have to be like really assertive and sexy. And it was quite the shift in identity. And she described, she was this amazing woman and she described using a parking lot meditation.

So she would do it. You know, a few minutes of meditation and it would really help her to [00:24:00] transition into, I mean, she had an exotic dancer identity, but she would sort of really mindfully entered into that identity.

And for her, it just really helped to keep them more distinct. And so I think you can see all sorts of ways that just having some rituals or a quick, just, you know, setting up intention to make the shift can be very, very

Lori Mihalich-Levin: helpful.

Yael Schonbrun: You also mentioned guilt. So I think that, you know, when we're juggling multiple rules, we often feel guilty, right?

That we're falling short of expectations and whatever we're not doing. And you talk about. Sort of asking yourself some important questions and it starts with asking expectations you're falling short of. And I wonder if you can kind of talk us through what you recommend to parents who are really struggling with that, those guilty self narratives.

Yeah.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: So I guess I'll draw on them here. One is that I adopted pretty early on the Teddy [00:25:00] Roosevelt quote comparison is the thief of joy. And I used to sort of chant that mantra in my head at various points, particularly like at four 30, when I was walking out of my office. To go pick up my child from daycare because daycare was going to close and it was gonna cost me \$10 a minute.

If I was late and everyone else was still working. Right. And that was a guilt trigger for me. Like, Oh my God, I should still be sick here. Um, and so comparison is the thief of joy. Really reminded me that like, I need to do what's right for me. I need to do what's right. For my family, family. You do you, um, the other thing that has helped me most, uh, perhaps ironically, is like acknowledging the guilt and letting it in this is sort of like, I think I, I heard a presentation by Jon Kabat Zinn and he was talking about Rumi is following the guest house and sort of like.

Okay. Like my guest house is full of all these different emotions. One of them is guilt and I'm going to come and say hello to the guilt for a moment and be like, okay, I'm feeling guilty. Um, I'm not going to try to push it away. I'm not going to try to say stop being guilty because that never [00:26:00] works. And then, you know, it's going to pass just like all the other feelings that emotions do.

And I'm going to focus again on what's right for me and what's right for my family. So, um, that's sort of the, the two strategies that I've. Use to successfully mitigate it myself over the years.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. I love both of those. I mean, I do think there's this paradoxical effect where whenever we try to push away and negative emotion research, all suggests that it tends to persist and grow stronger.

And so the answer is really just to make space for it, with compassion and then, you know, figure out where to direct your attention most effectively. Um, all right. So I wonder if we can then transition to talking about logistics and the chapter and your book on logistics is it's very long because you talk about so many different areas.

And I got to say, if, you know, if you're. Struggling with the balance of having young children and working there are just so many great tips. So I wanted to focus on a couple that were, really broadly applicable. , one of the things that I love that you [00:27:00] recommend is a lot of planning and you give really specific strategies and ones that you use in your personal life.

So I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about your Saturday basket and your annual planning day. Cause I love both of these.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Sure. Yeah. So, um, my husband and I are both. Planning nerds. And I know that's not the case in every couple where you have two planning, neurons that married each other who have married each other.

And this is since we both do love to plan. And, we basically started, a Saturday meeting and a Saturday basket routine and ritual out of complete desperation. So after we had our second child, that first year of having two children, we, for some reason, decided to take five different road trips to see family.

And at the end of that year, we were just. Wiped out, completely exhausted and looked at each other and said, well, what were we doing? Why were we thinking? And we wanted to be more intentional for the whole year about how we were mapping out, travel and thinking about, you know, the pressures we're putting on ourselves.

Also that first year with two kids and probably even the first year with one kid, [00:28:00] um, the children were six so often because of daycare and germs and all that sort of stuff that we, every night we went to bed going. Gosh, I don't know if we're going to be able to work tomorrow. I have no idea because we don't know baby's going to be sent home or what.

And so we started this, , ritual of meeting every Saturday to talk about specific things. , for example, who's on point which day if baby gets sick, , the Saturday basket is a tool that we developed basically to, um, not have to deal with. Minutiae and things that were stressing us out and pulling us away from being with our kids in the evening and consolidate the chaos into one.

One place and one time for that, that chaos to exist. So everything from like the form that needed to be filled out for school, to the electric bill, to, you know, whatever else came in the door or the list of things we needed to order on Amazon, all of that went into the basket. And then on Saturday we sat [00:29:00] down with the basket and sat down with a little agenda for what we were going to talk about.

, that tradition of meeting every Saturday night has continued through today. the meeting itself has evolved over time, depending on, you know, what our needs are. , but we do use that meeting, especially now during Colvin to really like plan out the next two weeks and know who's going to be working when, so that we can give some availability to.

Our clients and contacts and people we needed to speak with and know what our schedule is on a going forward basis. We talk about like our monthly money during that weekly meeting. , we talk about whether each of us has scheduled time to talk to our friends and see our friends. And, , whether we have a date night.

Different during COVID, but you know, we used to have a monthly date night that we put on the calendar. And if you were one of our babysitters, you know, you were going to hear from

us like on Saturday night after the kids were in bed. And then the annual planning day is something that we do, the last week of December.

And we have our kids go to. Some sort of childcare. And in the [00:30:00] past we have, , picked up and taken our laptops either to like a coffee shop, a bookstore, a hotel lobby somewhere and spent the day really like thinking about what we want the next year to look like. We, , do a word storm about the prior year and you know what?

It looked like the first year we had two children. Main word for that year was BHP iron ore train, which is the longest train in the entire world. And we didn't want the following year to look quite like that. Um, and so, you know, we map out, , the dates when we know childcare daycare school is closed and we plan our vacations around that.

We send notices to the family as to when the birthday parties will be so that we don't get millions of questions about when they're going to be coming. , so we just sort of try to take a forward looking perspective on things. And then we do a, , half year sort of check in. I'm in the middle of summer as well.

Yael Schonbrun: what I think. That strategy really speaks to is that if you plan ahead, if you sort of block off some time, do you planning, it creates, it can create a lot of common, sort of more [00:31:00] stability as you're going through most parts of your week. And I am less of a planner, but I will say that when it comes to food, I w. For the first couple of years, I was a parent would just every night be like, I don't know what I'm making for dinner tonight, but now I like, I don't know, cook that much ahead of time, but I make the plan. So then they don't have to think about it and stuff that I know all the, when I go shopping, I know I have all the ingredients and there's something that just relieves my brain from having to work, work out a solution in the middle of the day when I'm feeling kind of tired.

And so I, I like that you are self-described nerds, but I think that there are ways to adjust that if you're not. A full on planner. And then I guess I'm kind of curious. I mean, how do you adjust that kind of recommendation when folks tell you, you know, I'm not really, or my spouse, isn't really so much into planning in that way.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Right? So I've talked about that with a lot of, , new parents and, you know, one strategy is to entice the partner [00:32:00] who is not so into planning with perhaps a small bite size. Planning chunk around something that is also a reward. So for example, there was a mom who was telling me she was really struggling to get her husband to sit down and talk about some of the planning that she really wanted to do.

But when she turned it in to, um, after the kids are in bed, Beer and pizza on Friday while they pick one topic to plan around, he was totally game. He's like beer and pizza on Friday every Friday. Well, yeah, let's do that. So yeah. You know, whatever the, , that thing is that makes the other partners sort of more willing to engage in the conversation and reduce the level of how daunting it is, I think can really help.

And for you, like if neither partner is so into planning, but you're stressed out about it, you know what to cook or who's going to be on point for what then. But I think that

acknowledging that the stress level can be mitigated, as you were saying, can be really high. Even if you just pick one thing to plan around and experiment with it.

Like you don't have to view it as a Saturday night commitment for the rest of your life. Just play around with it. See if it [00:33:00] helps try it a couple of weeks and see what happens.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Yeah. So, you know, you don't have to go all in. You can do pieces of it and you can do it in ways that work for you.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Exactly.

Diana Hill: we've had a number of guests on the show that we've been inspired by and that are offering you our listeners discounts on their programs if you go to our website offtheclockpsych.com you'll be able to find coupon codes for the programs of dr Judson brewer dr Rick Hanson and Jen Lumenlun So go check it out at offtheclockpsych.com and start learning today

Yael Schonbrun: .

one other area in logistics that, , I wanted to spend some time on. Cause I think that this is relevant for most people, is this idea of setting boundaries at work and home, and then also figuring out. What to say no to, and how to say no, I really loved your recommendations for how to say no.

Right. I actually love that you, um, into a definition of what boundaries are. So I wonder if you can both talk about what boundaries are and then also how to say no, when something is sort of leaking into a boundary that you've [00:34:00] established. Right.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Right. So the boundary is really like what you're, you're letting in and what you're keeping out.

And I would be remiss if I didn't quote Brene Brown in, you know, her infamous saying about boundaries, which is, I think her mantra around it, um, around the concept, which is, Yeah, and I'm going to get the exact words, perhaps incorrect here, but choose discomfort over resentment is I believe what she says and really like the concept that you might feel some discomfort in saying no to someone can be overridden by the fact that you're not going to resent that accidental yes.

For a very long time. So I think you have to first acknowledge. Whether you're having trouble figuring out where you might draw a boundary or whether you're having trouble figuring out whether to keep the boundary. Cause you might put them in place, but then not keep them or you might not even be setting them.

So I think it's important to identify where you're struggling. [00:35:00]

And then in terms of saying, no, I think there are wonderful bridge-building ways to say no and not bridge burning ways to say no.

You know, if someone comes, they example that I might have written about that you might be thinking of is, you know, somebody came and asked me to be like in a leadership position for. An association volunteer type of thing. Right. And I had just had the second child and that was really not on the list of things that I wanted to do, at that point.

But, you know, I think you can say no and say like how much I truly appreciate that the person reached out. You can offer suggestions of other people who they might reach out to because. You're not going to be the one to do it. And then you can tell them to please keep you in mind and say like, please revisit that in a year.

And you know, a year later that person actually came back to me and said, Hey, you know, last year you told me no, but now we're looking for more people. Do you want to do this this year? And the answer was again, no, but you know, it was. It was a no in a kind way that encouraged the ongoing communication with the person. [00:36:00]

Yael Schonbrun: and I think that there are like various scripts that you offer that can really help people to say no in ways that they feel somewhat more comfortable with. But I love that you're, you know, pulling it up Renee Brown to say it discomfort is not the thing to be. Yeah. Afraid of.

You want to make sure that you don't put yourself in a position where either you're getting depleted and resentful or that you're acting. Out of line with your own values.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Right? Right. The other thing I'll say is you can view the boundaries as an experiment too. So if you're really struggling to turn off your phone, you know, let's call it like six to 8:00 PM because you want to be with her family, like try it for a night and see what happens and commit to trying it for the next three nights and see if the world blows up and see if anyone missed you and see if anything went dreadfully awry during that time.

And if it didn't, then there's evidence that you can set a boundary. It can stick and the world can not implode. Right. .

Yael Schonbrun: So next I want to talk about turning leads into leadership.

So in sum, this is kind of a crazy [00:37:00] idea, but as we've already talked about, there is, you know, real solid. Research backing. And you know, a lot of people can sort of speak to this from personal experience that work can benefit parenting in that parenting. It can make you more skillful and successful at work.

And so I think the question is how can folks go about doing this? And you give some really great recommendations, like even starting like. Before you've gone on leave, have some things to think about, you know, things that you can do while you're on leave and then things that you can do when you get back.

And I wonder if you can sort of just pull some of your favorite tips.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Sure. So if you haven't yet gone on leave, I think one thing you can think about doing is writing into your work goals for that year. Um, all the work that you're going to be doing. Making for a smooth transition when you go on leave and when you return.

And I really view a lot of that maternity, particularly maternity, but also any parental leave planning as some of that hidden office housework that happens that no one seems to [00:38:00] get credit for, but we put our hearts. Our hearts and souls into making sure things go as smoothly as possible. And so I'm building it into work goals.

And then, you know, when you returned from leave and you're yeah. Being evaluated, first of all, do the evaluation. I had someone say to me, well, I was only at work for a couple of months and I was given the option of whether or not to do the evaluation, a formal evaluation process. Like do it. You definitely completed things while you were on the job.

Even if you were there for a couple of months, , that benefited your organization. So take credit for those and take credit for the work that you did to make a well-planned leave and return. , for me, leadership is also around, , Or can be around the concept of showing up as a working parent in your workplace and letting other people know that you're there and providing support to other working parents.

And I know that there are good reasons why people are more or less public in their working role about their working Parenthood. Um, [00:39:00] And even for me, like I sometimes divide the line between my colleagues who I'm very, very open with and I want them to reach out to me and my clients who I might not say I'm out this afternoon because I, my kid has a doctor's appointment.

I just might say, I'm not available this afternoon. , but you know, sort of how you frame it is up to you, but I think showing up as a leader in your workplace and. Saying it's normal for me to work a 50% schedule as a partner at a law firm and to do other things in the other half, including parent my children, , can really go a long way in inspiring other people to, , follow suit.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. I've mentioned this before in the podcast, but Emily Oster who writes

Lori Mihalich-Levin: the data,

Yael Schonbrun: she is amazing, but she sort of started this hashtag movement that is quiet now, amidst all that. It's other stuff happening in the social media world of like hashtag parenting in the open. And I just really loved it that, you know, the more that we sort of pushed our workplaces to accept all parts of us, our whole self, , that it just normalizes [00:40:00] it.

And. You know, stops this pattern of pretending when we're at work, that all we do is work and that when we're at home, that we don't have a work life, that if we can sort of bring the other roles into our lives, even as we're focused on one, that it can, it can be even more beneficial.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Absolutely. Absolutely. I also want to say that I sort of became a serial founder of working parent groups, both at my prior employer and at my current law firm. And I think I'm working parent communities within employers can be so powerful in helping parents connect with and find one another. They can be really amazing business development opportunities too.

I've definitely gotten work from having attended some of the parent related events. , I've heard it said that the. Playground is the new golf course. So, you know, we can connect around our parenting. , but I have formed the community called the working parent group network of the leaders of working parent groups.

I'm at organizations across the country. And it seems that there is this momentum building within organizations [00:41:00] to support affinity groups and employee resource groups that are focused on parent issues. And so, you know, if you belong to a working parent group, or if you're the leader of one of these groups and want to join this community, it's, you know, an email list and we have a call every couple of months, , You can go to mindfulreturn.com forward slash WPN for working parent group network and sign up there.

And really, it's just a way for people who are running these types of mostly volunteer groups to not have to recreate the wheel every time, and to be able to serve as a leader, supporting the other, working parents at your own organization. I

Yael Schonbrun: . And that's also a nice segue into the last, , sort of theme of the mindful return course, which is building community and how important, I mean, I like how you're sort of saying that this a support group for parents at work is both a networking opportunity and just the general support structure to talk about issues that come up.

, But there's so many different ways to build community. And, um, what I love too, [00:42:00] is that you describing your writing that one step in your initiating mindful return was your experience of building community through the abundant mama project and how powerful that was for you. So I wonder if you can speak to sort of this, this theme of building community and why it's so important.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Yeah. So I think probably the biggest mistake I made as a brand new parent was just to say, I'm, self-sufficient, I'll figure this out myself. Like I don't need it, anybody leave me alone. Right. And in part that was sort of my, um, emo prior to kids, but it was also like I had my first baby and then my second baby in the middle of winter.

And I didn't really want to go out and see a lot of people. And, um, the hibernation in isolation was not healthy in retrospect. And, you know, had I not felt so isolated, maybe I never would have created mindful return, but definitely inspired both to find communities that would be helpful to me and to try and, you know, spread the word as far as possible that you don't have to go through the transition back to [00:43:00] working Parenthood alone.

And I did find so much power for myself in joining an online community through, as you said, the abundant mama project, abundantmama.com. I joined this cohort of about a hundred

moms from all over the world who weren't all, , their kids were all different ages and some of them stayed home and some of the work.

So it wasn't really around the focus wasn't around working Parenthood. , but just the fact that I was in community with these hundred other people for four weeks on this online platform. And every day I would wake up, Oh my gosh, me too. That's how I feel. That's just. Gave me the sense of reassurance and connection that I was really lacking.

And so in creating the mindful return. Course, um, although it's, , an asynchronous course that you can take at any time from anywhere, it's a cohort based model. And it's like, you're in this group with other people who are all going through the transition at the same time you are. And, you know, at one point I had offered this course sort of on demand that you could take [00:44:00] whenever.

And that didn't create the community that I knew was so critical to making sure people. Are healthy during this period of time. So I sort of like abandoned that project and made it so that you have to join a group when you're, you know, coming through the mindful return program.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. I mean, I can imagine just for my own personal experience, that that might be one of the most powerful pieces of your mindful return courses, meeting with people who have, uh, children of similar ages that are sort of in a, and that you're sort of learning the different modules at a similar pace.

And that you're sort of in communication, even if the learning is asynchronous, that you're serving communication with the same group of people over time, because I know. Definitely that my experience was that entering into Parenthood can be a very isolating experience. And it's so overwhelming and you, and you don't even know what's normal and what's not normal.

And it feels sort of scary, ready to ask, have that place where it feels safe to talk about. And that you're sort of all [00:45:00] in a position of learning and, and, you know, as you've moved through it together,

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Yeah, absolutely. And, um, I've really enjoyed keeping in touch, which with the folks who go through the program, we have a private, um, mindful return alumni community on Facebook and one on LinkedIn.

And we do a monthly community call. And just like that, the fact of being able to sort of track along with these people, right. Who, um, their kids are growing and now we're, you know, people are talking about, well, what about kindergarten? And it's been a nice community to follow over time

Yael Schonbrun: I just wanted to sort of share, cause you had an interview that you and I connected way back then you shared with me, and I know you've written about this, that you design mindful return as an eCourse.

To help working parents. And you did it literally in 20 minute increments that you had available mostly after your kids went to bed or on the airplane during work trips. which I just think is so amazing. It shows the power of psychological flexibility and , our persistence and our ability to, do something when [00:46:00] it really matters, even when we're pulled in lots of different directions.

And I'm just curious, I mean, do you, at this point, remember what that experience was like for you?

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Yes. And I remember it, um, a new, because I am currently in the midst of creating a course specifically for managers of people who are going out on leave. And right now, given COVID life, I'm sort of recreating that scenario for myself, and doing the 20 minute increments and like having a map of the lessons I want to create and mapping it out because I, I recognize it as a really high priority, but one that doesn't have a deadline.

Um, I do recall, you know, grabbing those 20 minute increments and feeling on fire about creating the lessons, because I wanted to have the impact on like reach the new parents who I wanted to reach. And, you know, since then I have read some studies about, , passion projects and side gigs and how those can really fuel our energy.

And even like having a podcast could be a side [00:47:00] gig or a side project, and those can actually make our Workday more tolerable. , because we have this other outlet for this thing, that's really, you know, I'm able to provide an outlet for our creative energy. And so I remember being really, really on fire and like craving those 20 minutes when I could sit down and work on

Yael Schonbrun: this.

Yeah. I actually can really relate to that too, and. What I've found really interesting. I think that the data on the passion projects really fits in with the neurological research that suggests that when you take a step away and really engage in other roles, like, so for example, parenting that of our brain, the default mode network really gets to work on, on whatever it is that we're not.

Focused on and that we actually are doing some work when we're not doing work. our mind in its rest state can actually be quite productive, and so that when we returned to whatever the passion project is, the thing that our mind has been sort of chewing on in the background.

We're really prepared to sort of get going. And I just think the neurology behind it, it was [00:48:00] really cool. And to me it really does bolster. The argument that work in parenting can really feed each other in really incredible ways.

They can empower each other, enrich each other.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Yeah, absolutely. I, I just had a flashback to a violin teacher. I had growing up who was also a. A really wonderful composer. And I remember at one point he

said that he composed all of his music on the back burner, essentially like in between things like it all just came to him because he was focused on something else.

And then he would sit down and scribble out the music that he was back burnering for him. And it's the same concept, right? Absolutely.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Yeah. It reminds me too something that I spoke a little bit about with Alex Pang, who had written this terrific book called rest. . So Alex Pang has all these really great examples of historical figures and a lot of them are artists, but he talks about how earnest Hemingway would intentionally.

Stop his work in the middle of a sentence and like turn into other things. And when he came back, it would just like be available to him, whatever the next passage was, would just be available because his mind is kind of been working on it, but he sort of set himself [00:49:00] up in that way. And that's one of the things that I like to think about that sometimes we're pulled away.

And when we're not really done with whatever we need to do to go parents, you know, for working on a project and that we can reframe that as being like, okay, well, let me let my mind kind of continue on and not send too much energy towards frustration while allowing myself to feel it.

Um, but just know that there can be something helpful that's happening in the background.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: especially during COVID, I've heard a lot of, um, stress from people who do not have children around not turning off the Workday at all. And that can be really distressing as well. That's such a grid for as many challenges as I have having my children at home.

I don't have that problem. Right. I do disconnect from work. Many times a day on a various, you know, for various reasons to help them out. And, um, that does help reset me in some ways, even though it's all exhausting.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. So you're starting this new course for [00:50:00] managers of folks that are going on leave. And then , you started mindful return with a course for new moms, but now you also have courses tailored for you dads and also for parents of children with special needs.

And I wanted to give you a chance to sort of speak about the ways that you're sort of diversifying what is available to individuals who are going out on leave or, or returning from leave.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Sure, sure. So I started off with the passion for stopping the leaky women's leadership pipeline and, you know, built a course based on my own experience, returning to work after parental leave.

And, , after, companies and employers started offering my program to their new. Moms, I pretty quickly, maybe within the first year started getting requests from employers or

something that's gender neutral. And that, you know, they're particularly millennial dads were interested in a course like this as well.

And I think hooray, like the market is speaking and yes, of course you should have gender neutral [00:51:00] offerings and yes, of course the dad should be navigating this and. Yes, of course you should be encouraging the fathers to take leave as well, because we know that that promotes greater gender equality more broadly.

And so I started, yeah, no thinking about how I might expand to the dad's side. And I reached out to a wonderful man named Jeremy Smith, who was then at bank of America and had started a website. Himself, just sort of his own passion project about taking paternity leave. And we started talking and ultimately he and I collaborated on building out the dad version of mindful return.

and then, , maybe a year later I was, , Featured on the side hustle school podcast with Chris Guillebeau and someone, , a wonderful woman named Mia Duray, Raj from California, reached out to me after hearing that podcast and said, I love what you're doing. You've got something for moms. You've got something for dads and.

I'm a mom of special needs [00:52:00] twins. And, you know, I have particular concerns about working and parenting, , children who have so many medical appointments and all of that sort of stuff that I think you would really benefit from having, a third program offering, to specifically help folks in my position.

And so we developed a course for moms of special needs children, and then that evolved. , and I brought in a wonderful dad named Brian Levine who, , helped me to turn that into a course for parents of special needs children. basically evolving it so that it is gender neutral and it serves parents with kids of, of.

All different ages who have special needs. So it's sort of evolved over time.

Yael Schonbrun: And so are those courses specific to helping parents return to work or are they more like ongoing parenting supports?

Lori Mihalich-Levin: So the course for parents of special needs children is really how to balance or integrate working into being a parent.

Of a special needs child. [00:53:00] So, you know, we do touch on some returning to work concepts, but it's also more broadly tailored to how do I survive as a working parent, even if I have a kid who is, um, on the autism spectrum, who is seven years old or something like that.

Yael Schonbrun: . And I'm curious,

what are them modules or sort of the take home messages that are different for parents of children with special needs compared to parents of kids without special needs.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Right? So we still focus on those four themes of mindfulness and logistics and leadership and community, but all the lessons are written by either.

Mia or Brian or, someone who has a child with special needs. Um, and so it's written through their lens of how they experience and what most help them to be mindful. So, for example, there's an essay that is very, widely circulated in the special needs world about going to Amsterdam. Oh,

Yael Schonbrun: yeah,

Lori Mihalich-Levin: that's quite [00:54:00] correct.

Yael Schonbrun: Welcome to Holland.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: It's

Yael Schonbrun: definitely linked to it. And I, I will read that essay in session with clients who are struggling with acceptance. It is beautiful.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Yes. Yes. So the course introduces that concept to folks who might not have yet run into it. and then, you know, really talks about. Self care and logistics from the context of the person who is grappling with special needs appointments and different types of childcare than might be the type that a typically developing child would experience, et cetera.

So, sort of building resources and then in the leadership space, we have a number of profiles of really amazing. Leaders and things that they've accomplished, in the workplace while also having special needs children.

Yael Schonbrun: That sounds amazing. And I can also just imagine that having community, if you're the parent of a child with special needs might be especially important [00:55:00] because I know that that can feel really lonely.

Well, I just think that the work that you're doing is so impactful and I'm so glad you're doing it and we'll definitely link to it.

Yeah. Linked to your website, to your book. Um, are there other places that people can find you.

Lori Mihalich-Levin: Yeah. So I'm on all of the normal social media channels. Um, my website is www.mindfulreturn.com. And I am on Instagram and Facebook and Twitter and Pinterest and all those places. Um, we have a group on, on LinkedIn as well, and I co-host a podcast called parents at work, which you can check out.

And

Yael Schonbrun: yeah,

awesome. Well, thank you so much for joining us and, and for everything that you've done and continue to do, and we'll

definitely

Lori Mihalich-Levin: be in touch. Thanks for having me on yellow. It was a pleasure to speak with you.

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