



MIND & LIFE

Mind & Life Podcast Transcript Tish Jennings - Contemplative Education

Original Air Date: September 23, 2022

Retrieved from: <https://podcast.mindandlife.org/tish-jennings/>

Opening Quote – Tish Jennings (00:04): *We're very social beings. I think often in our modern world, we don't realize how social we are because we're not as socially dependent as we used to be. But if you look at our evolutionary history, we could not survive without our community, at all, period. And I think we're always reaching for that, we're always looking for that. When I say looking, I don't mean cognitively. I think heartfully... Our hearts are looking for, who am I with, and how are they, and how can I be with them? So it's very clear to me that there is a deep need that humans have to feel connected to one another.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:46): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today, I'm speaking with contemplative educator and researcher Tish Jennings. Tish has been a pioneer in bringing mindfulness and compassion into school settings, with a particular focus on teacher stress. I spoke with Tish earlier this summer and our conversation covers a lot of ground.

(01:08) We start off with her experience as an educator and a meditator and how that fed into her research. Then, Tish describes how teacher stress can build under the surface, and then contribute to challenges in the classroom environment. And she shares how contemplative practice can help—by bringing awareness to the automatic responses that can happen under stress, and helping us to shift them. Within that, we get into an interesting conversation about the process of attunement and a kind of energetic resonance that can happen between people, really highlighting our foundation as social beings. Tish then discusses how teachers can be sensitive to students who've experienced trauma, and she covers some of the problems with the industrialized model of education, and how teachers can become a force for change from the inside. We talk about yoga and body sensation as particularly effective forms of mindfulness for young children. And we discuss the role of body awareness in general in helping us relate to our emotions. We end with Tish's thoughts on what young people need most right now.

(02:20) Please do visit the show notes for more information on Tish's work, and think about if you know folks in the education system who might be interested in this information. Feel free to share this episode with them. I also highly recommend checking out Tish's lecture from when she received the Cathy Kerr Award for Courageous and Compassionate Science. It's a really accessible and also a very personal story of her research. There's a link to that in the show notes as well.

(02:48) I find Tish's work to be a really powerful example of how contemplative practice and the ways it can help us shift our minds can have critical implications in the world—in this case, in how the next generation is shaped and held throughout their education. I really enjoyed chatting with Tish, and I hope you get a lot out of this too. I'm so pleased to share with you Tish Jennings.

Wendy Hasenkamp (03:14): Well, it's my great pleasure to welcome Tish Jennings to the show. Thanks so much, Tish, for joining us.

Tish Jennings (03:19): Thank you. It's really a pleasure to be here with you today, Wendy.

Wendy Hasenkamp (03:23): So I know that your research and your work has really been informed by your own lived experience. I'd love to hear a little bit about how you got into this field and ended up doing all of this work.

Tish Jennings (03:37): Well, it is kind of a long story, but I'll try to condense it. But it is interesting that it's been 50 years since I started practicing meditation as a 17 year-old. When I think about that, it kind of blows my mind (it also gives away my age). But I think having that long of a practice and also the ups and downs of that practice, because, of course, it had its good times and difficult times, and watching the evolution of how those practices influenced my career at different points is really interesting.

(04:17) Originally for me, I became attracted to it because I was looking for a way to deal with anxiety. I don't think I realized how much it would help anxiety, but somehow I thought it might. So that's when I started practicing Zen meditation. This was before I was a teacher or even really working in any profession. But when I became a teacher, I realized that when I practiced regularly, when I was very devoted to my practice, I could be more attuned to my students. I could understand their perspectives better, and I could manage my own emotional reactivity in ways that I wasn't as well prepared to do when I didn't practice regularly.

(05:05) Which motivated me to maintain a practice and to evolve a practice I would say, too, to keep it fresh. Because I think one of the reasons why our practices may go up and down is because we get bored with them, or we become desensitized to them in some way because we've been doing them in a routine way. So I think part of my lifelong practice has been keeping that fresh, and finding ways to reinvigorate the practice and learning different strategies and applying them in different ways. I think that's really important. I think I've learned a lot from that because there's not a one size fits all, not only for an individual, but for a context and a situation. And I think part of becoming a skillful practitioner is understanding yourself enough to know when you need what. The mindfulness can help with that too, because you become more aware of what you need in any given moment and it becomes a lot clearer what might be helpful.

(06:07) So I think where the biggest insight came in my profession was when I spent 15 years supervising student teachers. And part of that involved observing classrooms, so I observed many, many, many hours of classrooms. And I was teaching the same students classroom management that I was observing, and I started noticing something really interesting. I saw teachers unintentionally trigger problem behaviors in their students. It kind of blew my mind when I saw this happening because I thought, why would we do that unintentionally? Because obviously we don't want to do that.

(06:45) When I tried to explain what I was seeing to these students, they really couldn't see it. It was very hard for them to understand what I was talking about. I'll give you an example what that might look like. So if I'm a teacher and a student's doing something that is interfering with my goals, it's going to trigger my stress and my anger and my frustration. And I may not perceive the intentionality of that behavior accurately. So I may overreact. I may personalize it. I may think that this kid is just trying to drive me crazy. And so then I misinterpret the student's behavior and I respond... Maybe my response is over exaggerated. I'm overreacting. The student is going to be defensive, and the student might get angry back at me. And so then in that way, I might have actually caused a behavior problem that wasn't there to begin with, because I misapprehended what was happening.

(07:43) It took me a while to understand that that's what was happening. I can say that now, but at the time, I didn't get that. That's what motivated me to go back to school and study stress and coping in my human development doctoral program. And that's when I ran into Paul Ekman—when I learned about him in the Cultivating Emotional Balance project and learned about his work—that's when it all started clicking for me. At this time was my early stage of my interactions with Mind & Life as well. That point, I would say was a really critical turning point for me, because all of a sudden I knew how I could help these teachers that I had been trying to help. And that's when I started on this career path that I've been on for almost 20 years now.

Wendy Hasenkamp (08:33): When you say you knew how you could help, that is through developing training programs that incorporate these kind of strategies for teachers?

Tish Jennings (08:42): Yeah. In the Cultivating Emotional Balance project—you know, it came out of that dialogue with His Holiness that Dan Goleman wrote about in *Destructive Emotions*. So out of that, Paul Ekman and Allan Wallace got together and they thought, can we combine emotion skills practices and mindful awareness practices (compassion practice, mindfulness practice), can we combine them in a way to support people's emotional awareness and emotional regulation? And they chose teachers for that study because they thought this would be a really important population to work with.

(09:17) So when I learned about this, I thought, "Ah, this is exactly what I want to do!" I was interested in helping teachers' well-being, supporting that, but it was because what I really cared about was the teacher's behavior. So even if the teacher's stress went down, if they didn't behave any better, to me, that wasn't what I was looking for.

Wendy Hasenkamp (09:36): Is that because you were seeing the effects of the teacher's behavior on the entire student classroom dynamic?

Tish Jennings (09:42): Right. I mean, if they're calmer, but they don't interact with their students any better, then... you know. So in the Cultivating Emotional Balance (CEB) project, we were looking at teacher outcomes, but we weren't looking at classroom outcomes. So I wanted to test that, and that's when I got my Varela Award to observe classrooms in that population of teachers. It wasn't a big enough sample to really study properly, but it was a pilot. And it gave me an opportunity to create a bigger study to replicate that to see, looking at the classrooms, does CEB change classroom interactions? In the small pilot we did on that, we did not see differences. When I talked to Paul Ekman about that, he said, "Well, these skills have to be contextualized. You can learn emotion skills. But if you don't know how to apply them in your context, then it might not necessarily change your behavior." And that made so much sense to me.

[\(10:42\)](#) So when I began working at The Garrison Institute and we started developing the CARE program—Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education—what I did was I took what I'd learned from CEB and I applied it to the classroom challenges. So we created activities that allow an individual to reflect on their own emotional reactivity in a particular context, and to explore it mindfully using different practices to better understand where it comes from. Where is this trigger from my past? What is it that I learned that is giving me the impression that what's happening in this classroom is problematic, right?

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(11:27\)](#): It sounds like therapy built in there a little bit.

Tish Jennings [\(11:30\)](#): You know, since then, and I've become more familiar with cognitive behavioral therapy, it is kind of cognitive behavioral therapy in a way. Because in order to understand why I am perhaps overreacting to a student's behavior, I need to understand what the roots of that are. I have a really good example of that, one that I use all the time, which is feelings around being late. So I was raised (and some of us were not raised this way, but) late means disrespectful to me, when I grew up. So I have a script that being late is disrespectful. So if someone's late, I immediately feel judgmental. If I'm late, I feel anxious and worried that the other person's going to be mad at me. If I project that on a student, if a student comes in late and I immediately assume that student's being disrespectful, but that is out of context. I don't even know why the student's late, right?

[\(12:33\)](#) So these are habitual... I call them "habitual patterns of body and mind" that interfere with our ability to be present. And they show up a lot in our interactions with children, whether we're a teacher or a parent, because that's where we learn them. We learn them from our parents. So they arise in those interactions very automatically. When you talk to parents, and I'm a parent myself, you often hear that, "Oh, I sound like my mother. Oh, that's so horrible!" But that's where we learn these things, from our parents. I think that's one of the reasons why this adult-child interaction, and being mindful of it and applying these skills to that interaction, is so critical.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(13:18\)](#): Right. Can you talk a little bit more about how mindfulness and contemplative practice, in your experience and maybe the teachers that you've worked with, how that specifically can help break out of those habit patterns?

Tish Jennings [\(13:31\)](#): Yeah. I'm just surmising this from my observations; we need to really study this in sort of micro level to really understand it. But what I think is happening is as I become... If I'm a teacher and I'm learning these practices, I'm becoming more tuned in, I would say. I'm more noticing the sensations in my body. So I think somatic awareness is part of that. And they gain that somatic awareness through breath awareness practice, through body scan, through mindful movement, like mindful walking. They become more attuned to the physical sensations going on at any given moment.

[\(14:20\)](#) They also become more attuned and aware of habits of mind, and also the habits of the mind and the body together. Because when the body is reacting, you start feeling sensations and you hear in your mind stories along with those. I think that's a very deep level of self-awareness. In the social-emotional learning world in education, we talk a lot about self-awareness, but it's kind of superficial. I think what I'm talking about is a very deep self-awareness. So I think that is tuning an instrument that teachers are using while they're working.

[\(14:57\)](#) Now, I think also that the job itself of teaching is so cognitively demanding—because you're having to look at lots of little people all the time and they're all doing different things. And you're

supposed to be monitoring all of them, and you're supposed to be keeping some content in your mind that you're delivering in some form or another. That's a really heavy cognitive load. And I think often if you don't have this skill set, if you don't have this built in, it's very easy for your stress response to start to rise without you even noticing it, because you're so focused outside yourself. What can happen is, one little thing can tip you into reactivity and you didn't even see it coming, right?

[\(15:47\)](#) So I think one of the biggest things that is going on, is that they're going, "Oh, I'm starting to get stressed out. I notice my shoulders is getting tense. I notice my jaw tensing up. I'm aware that this is happening. And I know from my own experience that when that happens, I tend to overreact. I'm going to be proactive and calm myself down." In whatever that... Sometimes that just means stopping. It means taking a pause, a breath, and just doing that sometimes can really shift what's going on. Because you can also imagine that as a teacher, as I'm getting more and more anxious, guess what's happening in my students?

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(16:30\)](#): Right, they can sense it.

Tish Jennings [\(16:31\)](#): Yeah. We also know that these emotional states are very contagious, especially with children. Children tune into the adults around them and they're very tuned into their emotions. You can't hide your emotions from kids. So if I calm down, then they're more likely to calm down too. Because what can happen is, you can create these negative feedback loops where the teacher's stress promotes dysregulation in the students, the students start reacting more, and it causes more stress in the teacher. So you have this negative downward spiral.

[\(17:05\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(17:31\)](#): Something you just said is making me think of something I've heard you speak about before, about the way that just the demeanor of the teacher, if you're able to have a kind of mindful stance or project this calmness, you've talked about how that does influence the energy... I don't know how to put it, but it affects the others in the room, the students. It strikes me that that's, of course, applicable outside the classroom as well, for any of us. That fascinates me because I've seen that a lot—like a meditation teacher or somebody who is very skilled, just kind of have this pervasive effect around the people around them. So I just wanted to dig into that a little bit with you and see what you think is happening there. Sometimes I've heard that described as "a settled nervous system settles other nervous systems." I don't think that this has really been studied directly in a way, but it would be fascinating to think about how to do that.

Tish Jennings [\(18:33\)](#): Well, I actually have a colleague who's very interested in attunement. She hasn't studied the impact of mindfulness on attunement, but she has studied a physiology attunement between parents and children. So it's possible to study this and I think it would be fascinating... I think we really do need to study this more. She was studying it in a one-on-one dyad situation, not a one adult, group of children kind of space. Although I also know there's some interest in studying that as well in a group setting.

[\(19:07\)](#) This is a really good question because Dan Siegel talks a lot about... What does he call it? I think he calls it the eighth sense, this interpersonal sense, like this sense of attunement. I'm not sure how we quantify it, but we feel it, for sure. And I think that's what we're tuning into is this sense of attunement to one another. We're very social beings. I think often in our modern world, we don't realize how social we are because we're not as socially dependent as we used to be. But if you look at our evolutionary

history, we could not survive without our community, at all, period. And our children are so dependent on parents to survive. So it's very clear to me that there is a very deep need to feel connected to one another that humans have.

(20:00) And I think we're always looking for that. I think we're always reaching for that. We're always looking for, who am I connect... When I say looking, I don't mean cognitively. I think heartfully... Our hearts are looking for, who am I with, and how are they, and how can I be with them, right? I don't think it's necessarily conscious.

(20:22) But my own personal experience, especially in the classroom—this was the other reason why I started realizing that these practices would be helpful under this situation was because—I was very good at doing this with my students. It was not hard for me to feel attuned to my students. I felt very connected to them, and I could tell that my own emotions were affecting them. So I was very conscious of how I was expressing myself, and how I was feeling, because you can't hide it, as I said. So I worked very hard to maintain a kind of composure as a teacher. A real composure, not a fake acting composure, which teachers are often taught to fake it, right?

Wendy Hasenkamp (21:09): And I bet students can tell that as well.

Tish Jennings (21:12): They can. There has been research that's actually shown that they can. Teachers think that they are hiding emotions, but they're not. And other things like, for example, sarcasm is another one that teachers often use, thinking the kids won't to understand them. But even though they don't understand the language around the sarcasm, they can feel the sarcasm. Sarcasm has a bite to it that you can feel. Kids know that there is something here that's uncomfortable, even though this teacher is smiling, which is a disconnect.

(21:47) So when things like that happen, kids don't trust the adult, because what the adult is expressing outwardly and what the student is sensing are not matching. And depending on where that kid's experience lies, that kind of distrust can be very frightening. If this kid has been exposed to trauma, and they have adults at home that are not trustworthy, and even hurtful, then an adult doing this can be very scary and they can shut down to try to protect themselves. Or become defiant as a way to protect themselves. And teachers often really don't see this at all sometimes. So there's so much in these interpersonal dynamics that teachers need to know. And when I realized this—they get none of this in their training at all. It's not part of the training, and it's so important.

Wendy Hasenkamp (22:46): You have a book called *Trauma-Sensitive Classroom*. I'm wondering if that's part of what you're digging into there. What kind of things do teachers need to bring with the awareness of kids that may have been exposed to trauma?

Tish Jennings (22:59): Yeah, thanks for asking that. Well, one of the reasons I became really passionate about trauma-sensitive work is that I am a survivor of trauma myself, as a child. And I saw from a child's perspective these misunderstandings of behavior, and even damage that can come from that misunderstanding, from my own experience. So I would say I felt obligated to try to communicate what it's like to be a student trying to be in a classroom when you're living through this kind of trauma, and how important being aware of what is happening and being compassionate and developing skills to express compassion during times that... It's really hard sometimes to express compassion when the person that you're interacting with is interfering with your goals. I think that is the biggest stressor that behavior poses for teachers because...

(24:01) And I'm going to take a little side step here because I just have to say, our current school systems are very toxic—for teachers and students. So I never want to give the impression that these practices are going to alleviate those kinds of systemic stressors, because I feel like that's really unfair to the individual to put that on their shoulders. There are structural systemic problems that a lot of times create this sense of pressure. There's time pressure, because the system is set up in a very tight timeframe, and if you don't get certain things done by a certain time, you can have problems. And so that creates time urgency. There are standards that are imposed from the outside that teachers often don't agree with, that they have to deploy, and that can become problematic.

(24:56) So they have all these stressors that are already imposed on them. And then a student interferes with the goal that they are trying to accomplish, because they're trying to do their job. And so the first thing that happens is, we feel frustration when our goals are thwarted. So it's easy to overlook the need of that student in that moment because the need is interfering with my goal. We have a goal-need conflict here.

(25:28) If teachers realize that the way they're responding to that student could actually make the problem worse, and that they also have the capacity to actually support the healing process of that child, then it kind of shifts everything into a different realm. Those other demands sort of become less important, I would say, and then compassion becomes more accessible, because I'm not so driven by this structural demand that has been imposed on me. Because what I really care about is children and their well-being. That's what I really care about.

(26:09) Actually that also points to a really important part of the practices I teach teachers which is intention setting. The way I do this, and it was drawing on His Holiness's ideas of secular ethics, is to have them investigate their own value system and how their values brought them to their job. What do you value? Why does that motivate you to do what you do? So that they're tuning into their own value system, their own ethics as a way to remember, "Oh, this is why I'm doing this." And then to think about, what is my best self? When am I my best? When am I doing what I intend to do? And how can I keep myself on track? So thinking about that, and then I might work a little bit on whatever it is that I see I need to work on, to aim in that direction. It's more of a directional intention rather than a goal.

(27:10) For example, if my intention is to be more patient, then if I can check in and remember every day that my intention is to be a patient, kind teacher, then during the day, if I find myself losing my patience, I can remind myself, yes, this is a signal. This feeling of tension, this feeling of stress is reminding me that I want to be a calm and patient teacher. So I'm going to take a moment and give myself a break. So it's not just the mindfulness, but it's the mindfulness deployed in an intentional way to improve my performance as a teacher.

Wendy Hasenkamp (27:51): I really appreciate you raising the structural and systemic issues with the education system. I know your most recent book, *Teacher Burnout Turnaround*, is thinking more on that level, about how teachers can work to change the system, maybe from the inside out. So could you talk a little bit more about, I guess first the industrialized model of education and the problems there (you mentioned some), and then your thoughts about what might be able to be shifted?

Tish Jennings (28:21): Yeah. I've been thinking a lot about this, even more since I finished that book. Our school systems—pretty much worldwide, but definitely in the US—really developed during the Industrial Revolution, during a time when we didn't know anything about child development. And we knew

nothing about learning science at that time. So we took a pattern or a way of teaching that wasn't very skillful and we tried to scale it. At the time, it was a very modern idea to apply the factory model to a system like education or a process like education.

(29:00) So that's why you see a linear sort of conveyor belt, I guess you could say, where a student, a child comes in at one point that's siloed by age across a linear process, where there are inputs that are plugged in at certain points and there are certain expectations and metrics that they have to achieve. And if they don't achieve those metrics, they're basically thrown out, or they're put into a different place. They failed in some way, because they're not fitting into this very narrow pipeline of what is expected.

(29:41) For the first part of the period that this system evolved, it worked pretty well because people were very... Our society was a lot more homogeneous, and all they were expecting was that adults could get to maybe fourth grade level. They just needed basic arithmetic and basic reading. That was kind of the goal. So if that's all you're trying to do, then that worked for the time. But today, that doesn't work at all. In fact, it's causing a lot of problems. It doesn't account for the diversity in our classrooms at all. I mean, I'm talking diversity in all different realms. It doesn't allow for individual growth curves. You know, kids don't grow linearly; they go up and down. Depending on what you're looking at, you're going to see different curves of growth.

(30:33) So we need to create spaces where an individual can develop the motivation to self-develop. We know human beings are very good at self-development. I mean, how else did we get to where we are? We can now do it in a community where we learn from one another, and we learn how to learn together in a community. And we also don't need to memorize things anymore. You know, Google is... *[laughter]* What we need to do is learn how to solve really difficult problems together, as a community. So we have to shift the way we're teaching, and we have to change the system.

(31:11) What I've been thinking about most lately, I've been really looking at Otto Scharmer's work because I'm really interested in, how can we bring mindfulness into the process of systemic change? I don't have the answer to that right now, but I'm really thinking about, how can we make these big systems changes mindfully, and how can we apply it in that way? And I think so far he's done the most that I've found thinking about how we do that. I'm not sure how we scale that process because I haven't seen a good example of that yet. But that's what I'm really thinking about right now.

(31:53) So when I wrote my book, I thought, well, maybe at the individual school level, if teachers understood these systemic challenges, they might be able to have some influence in their own individual schools. Because in some places, schools have a lot of autonomy. So that might be one leverage point where you could make social change at a small level.

(32:20) The book introduces this idea that social systems are created by human beings, and we can change them. Sometimes we think we're victims of them, but we are actually the creators of them, and the reinforcers of them. Now, the other sort of leverage point that teachers have is that there's a big teacher shortage. Teachers have more power to say, "Okay, I don't want to work like this. I'm going to go find a job somewhere where they're going to let me work how I want to work, how I know is going to help students learn. And this way that we're doing it is not working."

Wendy Hasenkamp (32:55): I wonder too, I know that the teacher shortage has been exacerbated by the pandemic and all the stresses—teachers, students, parents, that whole dynamic has undergone so

much stress throughout the pandemic. So I'm wondering just your experience through that, maybe lessons learned, and if you feel like that's a particular opportunity, or that has maybe pushed things to a point where, as you said, teachers can have more influence.

Tish Jennings (33:23): I think Otto Scharmer talks about something like crisis points or something like that. I don't remember the word he uses, but he talks about how there are opportunities to change systems. And I think the pandemic has done that in so many realms—in medicine and certainly in education. It's very obvious. You know, we've lost kids from the system. I can imagine myself as a high school student during the pandemic. I was a pretty independent learner as a kid, and I wasn't very socially adept. So for me, studying at home on Zoom would've been great. I would've loved it. And then I probably would've taken the GRE and gotten the heck out of high school, because I didn't like high school as a kid. *[laughter]*

(34:08) But I think a lot of kids did this during COVID. They just opted out. I think there's a lot of them that wouldn't have even had the resources to do what I just described, doing the GRE or anything. They may have just dropped out. I have a Master's student who's a teacher in high school in Washington, DC. During the pandemic, she said, "Half my class, I don't know where they are. I don't even know how to reach them." And I think part of that is they had had enough of school, and they were done. I think it gave students an opportunity to realize that maybe there was another way. Not that Zoom school is the best, but it was kind of like a door to the world that, oh, maybe the adults really don't know what they're doing. *[laughter]* And maybe we do have some choices.

(34:59) Because that's the other thing I've thought about is, how can we empower children to express their needs and what they would like in school? And I'm working with some other people on a 21st Century Learning Initiative here at the School of Education that is actually led by Howard Blumenthal, who was the creator of *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego*. He's a media guy. And so, having somebody outside of the education realm thinking about this has been really interesting—especially from the child's perspective, which is what he has been bringing to our conversation.

(35:34) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (36:00): I wonder, since you've been in this field of research, and really leading it in many ways, for such a long time, and you've done some of the largest randomized clinical trials on these kinds of interventions and things, I'm wondering if you could just comment on the state of the research about contemplative interventions in school settings.

Tish Jennings (36:18): Yeah, well, you may have heard about the MYRIAD Study, which just came out. It was a big study in the UK of a mindfulness-based intervention for adolescents. And they didn't show impacts on students at all. They did show impacts on teachers, which I think has been an overlooked outcome of that study. What I've been thinking about is that perhaps the teachers needed this more than the students needed it, perhaps in this particular case. Because one of the things I worry about, especially with adolescents, is that often as adults, we think we know what they need. Whether they [the students] need [mindfulness] or not... If I'm a high school student and I don't really think I need to do this, but they're making me do it, is this going to have a positive impact on me? I don't know. It feels to me like, especially in adolescence, there'd need to be more choice involved in it, more agency involved in this. The other thing too is that the measures that they were using might not have captured what the intervention was actually doing for these kids. I know they were looking at mental health

outcomes. There might have been other outcomes that they just didn't measure that could have had impacts too.

[\(37:33\)](#) So when it comes to these interventions and this research, I think we have to just take our time and take it one step at a time. I wouldn't dismiss the efficacy of that program completely based on that study. But I think we need to understand better, how do we create interventions that are developmentally appropriate? I think there's a tendency for us to think, "Well, this works for adults. Let's try to modify it in a way that will be appropriate for students." Well, maybe students really need something completely different.

[\(38:06\)](#) For example, when we started working on the Compassionate Schools Project, which I developed a curriculum for—it's an elementary social-emotional learning mindfulness and yoga program—it became really clear to me for younger students, yoga is a great way to practice mindfulness. Sitting quietly, still, for a young child, it can help for a few minutes to calm down and pay attention. We do a practice called calming and focusing, which is taking three breaths and listening to the chime for one second. But just being able to do that... I used to do that regularly when I was a teacher, this calming and focusing. It's great, but it's two minutes. And it's not noticing thoughts at all because kids, especially young kids, they don't have that metacognitive understanding or ability at all.

[\(39:01\)](#) So being in your body, and knowing where your body is in space, and being aware of that, to me is one of the most important things during early childhood. Where am I, and what space am I in, and where are the other people around me? I think also my background is in Montessori education and Maria Montessori understood that young children really have an interest in developing the acuity of their senses. And I can see how focusing on sensory input can also be a mindfulness experience for young children—noticing differences in texture and sound and visual or any kind of stimuli. What do I notice, and how can I really explore that? That's very interesting for young children. So those are the two places I see.

[\(39:58\)](#) Mindfulness doesn't look the same for a six year-old and a 26 year-old. I think we have a lot to learn about what is actually developing. We don't know. I know Rob Roeser has called it something like... I think he called it proto-mindfulness. That's the mindfulness that you see in young children. It's not the kind of mindfulness we have because there's not a metacognitive process going on, but they can be very attuned to the present moment. We know that. So how can we help them grow that? And what does it look like at 5, 6, 7, 10, 15, 25? That's something we need to work on.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(40:46\)](#): I'm struck by that you brought up the role of the body. We were talking earlier about somatic awareness for adults as a key to understanding emotions arising and things like that. And then this idea of training that in younger children, and that it's so accessible for them, it's a much easier way, it seems like, for them to get into that kind of awareness space. I'm wondering if there's more for you to say from that perspective, but also thinking about the trajectory, certainly in Western culture, as we age and it seems like we become more and more a little bit detached from our bodily awareness. That, I think, has a lot of ramifications in terms of what you're saying about becoming aware of emotional reactivity and things like that. So just curious your thoughts there, about the role of the body.

Tish Jennings [\(41:40\)](#): Wow, and this also actually circles back a little bit to trauma, because we hold trauma in our bodies in many different ways. For me, what has been really interesting—this is just my own personal experience, this is first person reporting—I realized at some point that my own ability to

care for myself was really damaged by the trauma I experienced as a child. Because when I had a need in my household, I got punished. Because having a need was an imposition on my mother, and it made her angry. And she overreact... Well, she had mental health problems. So having a child with a need, for her created incredible hostility and anger.

[\(42:31\)](#) And so as a child, I got the message—if I need something, I better hide it. Because if I express a need, I will be punished or hurt. So I hid my own needs from myself. And it took some years of therapy to realize that I was doing that. And part of becoming aware of my needs was this somatic awareness. So my own personal somatic awareness journey has been very powerful for me, to awaken the spaces where the trauma has been hidden, work through that, be present for it, which is very painful, but necessary to overcome the ways in which our bodies protect us.

[\(43:19\)](#) So as a child, shutting down those feelings was protective. It protected me. It got me to where I am today. But for me to live a full life of feeling, I have to be able to feel those feelings. And in the process, I started realizing all the beauty of the sensations of our body, oh my gosh! When you wake up that somatic awareness and you become attuned to it, it's really powerful. And it's beautiful. It also feels incredibly healing, because you start to make friends with this body that you're inhabiting. It's no longer something you're trying to hide from. I think that has been a very powerful lesson for me, personally.

[\(44:09\)](#) And as I've gotten older... I can see how there's a tendency as you get older to even become less and less aware of your somatic experience, because it can become more and more painful as you get older. But what I've learned is that those pain points are leading me to a healthy lifestyle. When I start noticing the arthritis in my feet, if I take care of that arthritis in my feet, if I do something proactive to deal with it, then it's not so bad. If I stop walking or I avoid doing things because I can't stand the pain, it's just going to make everything worse in the long run. So I think over time, I've become more attuned to my body, I would say, than I used to be, and that it's actually helping me.

[\(45:03\)](#) One of my favorite mindfulness practices is doing mindful Pilates. I do Pilates twice a week. And when I do it, I am very mindful of what muscles are moving, whether my breath is going in or out, how my breath is attuning to the tension or release in my body. And it feels incredibly wonderful. I know people do that in yoga, but for me, Pilates works better than yoga.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(45:31\)](#): You spoke in the very beginning about how you've really come to reinvigorate your practice over the years, and keep it fresh. I'm just wondering if you have some tips or take homes for the audience about some of your favorite ways to do that, because I think that can be helpful for so many people.

Tish Jennings [\(45:50\)](#): Thank you. That's a really good question. I think for me, the thread that weaves through those years is lovingkindness practice or caring practice or heart practice. For me, I find it very generative and rewarding to cultivate warmth and kindle warmth in my heart, intentionally, and to extend it to others. To me, that feels wonderful. So in order to do that requires mindfulness. To me, the varying in the practice can start with a calming and a focusing, like I talked about with children. I have to start by calming and focusing myself, and then it moves to noticing how I can... First of all, noticing are there any barriers to that extension of warmth? Because there always are. On a daily basis, there's somebody or something that is, I don't know, feeling like a barrier. Why is that happening? Noticing that, and then working to extend past that, like stretching, stretching that outwardly. In that sense, it feels like I'm mindfully opening my heart, I would say. So I'd say that's lately my go-to, is doing that work. To me, that's always very rewarding. It feels really good. I usually do it first thing in the morning. I

also do it laying in bed at night, and it's a great way to go to sleep. It calms me down right away. And if I'm ruminating, it takes me right out.

[\(47:37\)](#) I think another one too that's been a sort of standard is body scan, in terms of somatic awareness and noticing and being aware of when there's tension in what part of my body. It's not even just about tension, but it can also be, is this hunger or is this thirst? Or, what kind of hunger is this? What kind of food should I eat? What do I really need to eat? You know, I'm reaching for a cookie. Maybe that's not what I really want. What do I really want? Listening to the body in a deeper way, on a regular basis. And those are usually pretty informal kinds of practices. Just taking a moment before I start thinking about what I want to eat for dinner. Not just habitually looking in the refrigerator and seeing what's most convenient, but what do I really need? So I think a lot of it is mindfully asking myself, what do I really need right now?

[\(48:37\)](#) – musical interlude –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(48:37\)](#): I love that you brought up the lovingkindness practices. I'm just wondering how it's been for you bringing that into the classroom too, because that's a very different kind of experience than just pure mindfulness without so much of an emotion component.

Tish Jennings [\(49:24\)](#): I find teachers that I work with on this are very responsive to it, and students too. I mean, the students that we... We teach a "kind mind" practice in the Cultivating Emotional Balance project, we call it learning to extend a kind mind to others. I think we're all really hungry for this. I really do. I think we recognize now how important our connections with others are. We want to be part of a community that has a warm heart, as a group intention. So everybody that I do that work with has been very responsive to it.

[\(50:04\)](#) The other thing that we do often in some of the work we do is start to be more intentional about our emotional experience. Like, you can notice your uncomfortable emotions, like your anger, your frustration. But you can also notice and cultivate intentionally other emotions, like joy and enthusiasm and love and gratitude. We know we can do that. So I think sometimes it's not that hard to apply a mindfulness type practice to generating and feeling any particular emotion. One of the things I like to do is ask people to write down a lot of things that they feel grateful for. And then to just notice, how do you feel right now? Bring some mindfulness into your body right now. What does it feel like? How would you describe feeling grateful? What does gratitude feel like? Where do you feel it?

[\(51:02\)](#) When we do that, individually, there is some evidence that we're building resilience when we do that, from Barbara Fredrickson's work. But we're also building community when we do it together, because that's another thing she's discovered is we feel more connected to one another when we're jointly feeling these comfortable emotions. I use comfortable and uncomfortable instead of positive and negative because in our world, we don't want to pathologize those uncomfortable emotions. They're not bad. They're just uncomfortable. But often when you say "negative" to children, they think that you're talking about something bad. So I often avoid using that word.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(51:40\)](#): Yeah, that's a helpful distinction, thanks. Well, I'm wondering as we're starting to wrap up, what you think based on all of your experience is most needed by young people these days? What are some of the most important things that could be brought—in classroom settings, or not classroom settings?

Tish Jennings (52:02): That's a really good question. And I'm going to be really brave and say something really radical here. *[laughter]* I think they need adults to be present for them, and to listen to them, and hear what they have to say about what's going on. I think students, children have a lot to offer us, and we don't listen to them and we don't tune into them very often. We often impose our own beliefs about what they're supposed to do and how they're supposed to be, without being present for them. So I think what they need are caring, mindful adults.

(52:45) I think from there, I think if we threw out the testing—I'm going to say this—if we threw out the testing, and we took away all the time challenges, and let teachers have a day with their students, all day, and listen to them and ask what they want to learn, and follow them, I think we would see a huge shift in our schools. I used to teach that way, so I know it works. I'm not sure how we'd teach all the teachers how to do that, but I do know we can do that. And I'm hoping that maybe in my lifetime we'll see some shifts in this direction. That's what I hope.

Wendy Hasenkamp (53:26): Well, is there anything that you've wanted to mention that we haven't covered? This has been so wonderful.

Tish Jennings (53:31): Oh, it's been really great. I think as a society, speaking to everybody, we need to prioritize our children. We really do. Our society does not prioritize them. They are the most important thing in our world right now. If we look at the problems we're facing, think about what their futures are going to be. I'm going to be a grandmother in September, and I think about my grandbaby. I think about that little girl who's going to be born in 2022 and what is her life going to be like? And I am going to do whatever I can to make her life a good life. And not just for her, but for all of her generation. We have a future that we need to extend our compassion to, now. And I think that's the biggest message I'd like to leave everyone with.

Wendy Hasenkamp (54:28): Well, thank you so much, Tish. This has really been wonderful, and I so appreciate all the work that you're bringing to the field, and I appreciate you taking the time to chat with us today.

Tish Jennings (54:37): Oh, thank you. This has been really fun. Those were great questions. Thank you.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (54:46): *This episode was edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org.*

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