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[Dr. Ali:] Good morning.

How's everyone doing on this cold Saturday morning?

I'm impressed that all of you came out.

I'm—it's funny, I'm so short. I was worried about standing behind the podium that you'd actually be able to see me, but I'm feeling OK now.

OK. All right.

To give you a little bit of background about myself, because I think it would be helpful. For many years I was a professor, and I actually was the head of a Graduate School at the college that I was at. What I found, especially in the last few years of work there, is my job was mainly administrative, and all of the things that brought me a sense of purpose and joy—which was interacting with students—I had very little of that.

And so that prompted me to make another major life change, which was to just start working. I had always worked clinically for many years, and I've been in the field for close to 30, but I decided to come back to working full time and have been doing that for—I've been at Cornerstone, I think this is—I'm finishing… Is it my second year with you guys? Yeah. And it has been such a blessing.

I am also the mom of three children, boys. There is a lot of food that is consumed at my house, but two of my children are grown, and so I kind of get… I'm in that stage where I'm trying to navigate how to parent kids in their mid 20s. I also had a surprise baby—as people do when they are 40—who is in 6th grade. And so I am still involved with the PTA, cannot escape the elementary school where last year, right. So I have lots of experiences from a parenting point of view as well.

And I always try—I do lots of training, lots of professional development in business, with schools, with parents everywhere—and I always try to pick things… I think this is the practical side of me being a teacher for so long. I try to pick things that I know you can use. And what I have found is that even boys feel anxiety. It just tends to come out more as frustration and anger. And I will tell you, this is true of large boys too. No one is immune to feeling anxiety.

So I'm going to talk to you today about the magic of mindfulness. Back in 2013, USC put out a study—and I'm only going to reference it because it was 12 years ago—that we spend an average of 13 hours a day looking at a screen. It's probably even more now with the rise of TikTok. I don't have it downloaded, so I am not part of the craze, but you know, I do see the videos here and there. But back then, it was upwards of 13 hours a day.

What that tells us is that it is increasing the psychological mental load that we're carrying. So in addition to our daily responsibilities—things that have to get done, should get done, the parenting that we have to engage in, work responsibilities—because we're not giving our brains any type of break, we feel like we're constantly running, racing. We're not taking a moment to hit pause. Anybody guilty in here?

Couple of you. OK. So I like this when I worked with a lot of undergrads—and I actually still treat a lot of undergrads—but I find that this analogy works even with all of the grown-ups that I treat. I like to use the analogy of balancing the tray.

So I want you to look at your life as if it's a tray. And each glass on the tray represents some stressor, some problem that we experience in our lives. Some of us have, you know, these huge—like a big pilsner—that's a whopper of a problem. Some of us have shot glasses, which are smaller problems. Many of us might have just a bunch of eight-ounce glasses or 12-ounce glasses. The goal is, you know, we want to be able to balance that tray.

We don't often have control when stressors come into our lives. Some things happen unexpectedly, but what we do have control over is our minds and how we address those problems. And so today I'm going to talk to you a little bit about how we can balance that tray better.

So mindfulness has been in the news quite a bit for the past 10 years. We've done more studies and, through the use of functional MRIs, we know that it does have the power to actually change the neural pathways in the brain.

A little bit of background on mindfulness: it is mostly rooted in Buddhism, but there are sprinklings of Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity throughout it. You don't have to ascribe to any particular religion to do mindfulness. Most of the meditations are actually very non-denominational, and a lot of them really don't even talk about God. It's more about bringing you into the present moment—getting you to connect mind with body—which, when we're under chronic toxic stress, we have this disconnect.

It's why a lot of the techniques that we'll talk to you about today are considered grounding techniques. It's rooting you into the present moment. When we experience anxiety, we're either ruminating over something in the past or it's anticipatory anxiety over something in the future. And the problem with both of those timelines is that we can't control them, but we can control the present. We can bring ourselves into the here and now of the present.

And so I want you to think of mindfulness as a psychic decluttering. For 15 minutes a day, we're going to declutter your brain. Studies at Pitt, CMU, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison have found that people who meditate regularly have different patterns of brain activity. So this is what we use to short circuit the fight or flight that Tammy was talking about.

And I'm going to get a little neuroscience-y with you for a minute. What tends to happen when we are exposed to a stimuli with an emotional valence: the amygdala, which is a small almond-shaped part of the brain—it sits kind of right here—it's not part of the reptilian brain, but

it does function in a very primitive way. It basically decides, does this stimuli have a strong negative emotional valence? If it does, then it's going to release cortisol, adrenaline, noradrenaline—the stress hormones—into your system, and it happens within seconds.

What tends to happen when we're under chronic toxic stress is that the brain loses the capacity to switch back and forth between a real threat and a perceived threat. And especially with children, what can happen is everything that's coming in for them is a perceived threat.

In kids, we see it as they're fidgety. They're agitated. They're touching the kids' stuff on the desk beside them, or they're irritating their brothers—you know, "poke, poke, poke." Those are just some behavioral things. It could be a lack of attention and focus. You know, when you're under a lot of stress, you may see like, "Gosh, I'm having such a hard time reading this book or finishing this task that should be easy because I've done it 100 times before." And so it affects our ability to focus.

The benefit of mindfulness is that it helps us bring our bodies and our minds into the present moment. It focuses on deep breathing, which helps bring oxygen into the brain, which lends to better clarity of thought. It helps build out our capacity for compassion and empathy.

I like to tell this story. When I was a professor, I worked very closely with a lot of the college teams, especially the college football team. And I joke—if I can get 130 18- to 22-year-old boys doing mindfulness, I can get anyone to do it. OK, they bought in.

So the coach comes to me and he's like, "We're racking up too many penalties. This is a problem. They have no impulse control. They can't control their emotions. It's getting us into trouble. It's costing points." So I said, "What if we implement mindfulness?" And so we did. I went in for three weeks of camp every day and I did mindfulness with them. And then throughout the season, I went into the locker room—yes, I would have to announce 'woman on board' when I would walk in because you wouldn't know what you were walking into.

And so I would announce, you know, "I'm there," and we would do once-a-week mindfulness. But what I found is that most of the team, especially the starters, downloaded apps that helped them do mindfulness every day. They took it on as a discipline.

And because I was a researcher, of course I have to take data on this. Is it working? Let's see. So at the end of every semester—I did this for four years—I would pass out surveys and take data on it. And what we found, statistically, was that they played better. Penalties went down.

But what we didn't anticipate is that their grades improved. They were reporting to us that they had better relationships with their girlfriends. What? So I had to dig into that one. I mean, that's pretty interesting, right?

Once I dug in, it was because mindfulness taught them how to hit the pause button. So when their girlfriend would say something that would make them super angry, they would hit pause instead of reacting. It gave them space to think through what they were going to do next.

It's a miracle. Right? It works. It's just a simple practice.