MIND LIFE PROJECT

with Dr Elise Bialylew

Dan Siegel

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Elise: Welcome, Dan. It's so exciting to have you here today. I'm really looking forward to digging into your latest book, *The Yes Brain*. Thank you very much for your time.

Dan: Thanks, Elise, great to be here with you.

Elise: Dan, as a mother of a two-year-old myself, your book is particularly pertinent. But, for the listeners today that actually don't have children, what I found really interesting about your book was that it seemed to be not only applicable to parents, or people that are teaching or supporting children, but really to all of us, as humans who are trying to develop ourselves in ways to create more balance, resilience, and courage in our own lives. Is that your perspective?

Dan: Yeah. Absolutely. It's a beautiful way you're saying it. If we all could create this positive mindset, this way of creating a yes brain state, it would actually serve everyone, no matter their age.

Elise: I'd love to begin by just diving into this concept of the yes brain. What you actually mean by that, and also in contrast to what the no brain might like.

Dan: Well, I don't know if you want to do a little experiment, but we could do the experiment to feel it right here. Would you like to do it?

Elise: Yeah. Absolutely.

Dan: Okay. For you, Elise, just get yourself just ready to just respond. I'll say a word. I'll repeat it several times. Then I'll pause. Then I'll say another word and repeat

it several times. Then we can do some other things and talk about the experience. This thing, don't do this when you're driving, but you can do when you're sitting and just letting the experience take you over. Are you ready?

Elise: Okay.

Dan: No. No. No. No. No. No. No.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Take a nice deep breath. Try putting one hand on your chest, and one hand on your abdomen, and blow gentle pressure. Now switch out, so your hand on your chest goes to your abdomen, the one of your abdomen goes to your chest. Put some gentle pressure. Now, put it whichever way it feels most natural for you. Most comforting for you. Great. Now, take a nice deep breath. Then we'll let this exercise go for now.

Let's just start with quick feedback. Which hand was most comforting for you? Left on top or right on top?

Elise: Right on top.

Dan: Right on top. That's about three-quarters of people are that way, independent of handedness. It's so interesting. We don't know why. One quarter is left on top. That would be a doctoral degree you could get to figure out why.

Now, did you notice the difference, who you felt with no and how you felt with yes?

Elise: Yeah. Very distinctly. Quite surprising, actually. The no, it was a really sharp, kind of in the heart. I felt a contracting. It felt threatening. It felt like I'm closing down and I'm feeling attacked. There was actually for me a bodily sensation in the chest area. It felt like a punch or something.

Dan: Okay. I'm sorry about that, because it's a good thing to learn about it. In contrast, what did yes feel like to you?

Elise: It felt calming, and it felt like I was open.

Dan: Okay. Excellent. Now, in the no state, what we think is going on in the brain and body is your having what's called the reactive state that happens when you're threatening. It can include fighting back, fleeing, freezing – maybe tighten up your muscles and temporarily paralysing yourself, fainting, feigning death, collapsing. These four Fs of the threat state, we're just going to call the reactive state. It's a no brain state.

In contrast, your brain can enter the yes brain state, which is receptive and opening all the channels of sight and hearing, learning and connecting. It turns on what Steve Porges has named the social engagement system. It allows you to really connect all your different systems in your body, in your head, in your relationships, in a coordinated way with each other. It's where optimal learning takes place and optimal connecting to other people, and even to oneself. Let's call that the yes brain state, or receptive state.

The overall approach of the yes, is to say, what can you do for raising a child, let's say, or if you're a teacher, or having a classroom., or if you're a therapist or working with other people. Or, you're just a person in a relationship with other people in the world. How do you make sure that you're encouraging a yes brain state in others so that they can reach their optimal potential? So, it's not permissive parenting, for example. It's not, you know, a teacher in a classroom where you let anything happen. You create a structure which actually allows freedom to arise. But, what you do is you tune into the internal state of a person so that, even if you're creating structure and limits, you're not creating that no brain reactive state. That's an overview of what the whole thing is about.

Elise: I wonder if, then, you could perhaps come up with a practical example – I guess it would look differently depending on what age you're talking about – in terms of how you would respond then. Let's say, for my self-interest, if I have a two-year-old. Let's say someone has a two-year-old, a toddler, or a teenager in these reactive moments where you do need to respond and set a limit. How does that look when you're approaching that to support a yes brain.

Dan: Yeah. In there, your two-year-old's a daughter?

Elise: Yeah.

Dan: Okay. she comes to you, and she says, "Mum, I want to have a cookie before dinner."

Elise: Perfect.

Dan: Okay. Great.

Elise: How did you know?

Dan: I have never been there. Here are two ways you can respond. She comes to you, and she says, "Mum, I want to a cookie before dinner." You go, "No way. That is so stupid. What a dumb idea. No. We're not having cookies before dinner." So, that is one way to do it.

Here's the second way. This is the yes brain way. "Mum, I want to have a cookie before dinner." 'So do I. Oh, my god. Have your cookie before dinner. I could get into that. But, you know, it would actually make us not hungry to eat the nutritious food. So, you know what? Let's do this. We're going to have dinner, and you can help me cook dinner. Then why don't we bake some cookies while we're cooking dinner, and we'll have a cookie after dinner. That will be so much fun, because I also want to have a cookie before dinner, but that's not something really healthy for your body."

Elise: Okay.

Dan: Right.

Elise: You've created structure. You didn't say yes to the cookie before dinner, but what you did was you tuned into the internal experience of your daughter, so she feels felt by you, she's respected by you, and you created structure around behaviour. But, you tuned into her inner desire. "I would like a cookie."

That is completely different from what happens with the child who has a no brain parenting approach, a no mum or dad, where she feels humiliated because of the yelling, and shamed because someone isn't seeing what she's just feeling. Shame is different from guilt. It's where you feel defective. No brain parenting constantly creates this threat state.

When that kid goes out into school, the whole thing becomes about, "Can I achieve this, can I achieve that," rather than having an internal compass that guides them to a deeper sense of what it means to be successful in the world. They're clinging onto outward achievements that they can get very lost in they don't get the grade on an exam they want, or if they're not included with certain social groups that they want. They lose their way because they feel like they're failing.

A yes brain parent is really giving resilience to your child, because you're building this internal resource. There are four components to it – that spells the cheese brie – balance, resilience, insight, and empathy. We can go over that, but there's a methodology based on the science of how the brain develops. This repeated yes brain state.

The way to think about it as a parent is this. When you repeatedly create a state for your child, with a repetition that neuro-firing that is the basis of a state when repeated grows neuro-connections and changes the neuro structure. Neuro connections allow you to develop a trait.

If you want the trait of balance, and resilience, insight, and empathy, if you want to have creativity, and courage, and grit, and persistence to be a part of your child's yes brain trait, you can learn how to create yes brain states in interactions, like the cookie one with your daughter.

Elise: I'm just going to go a bit deeper in this practice before we move onto the next concept. What happens if you have a particularly passionate child that then, you know, here is what you're saying, but then escalates. Let's say we're talking about a tantrum now where there's big emotion. Then what do you do to step into this yes brain in that context where there's high reactivity?

Dan: Absolutely. You know, we have this beginning of the book, which is a quote from the ancient Greek philosopher quoted in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. It says, "I'm not afraid of storms for I'm learning to sail my ship." So, it doesn't matter whether a kid has a temperament that creates subtle emotional waves or huge storms, the technique is actually the same. Of course, every child is different. You adapt what you do in subtle ways to kids differently. The overall approach is the same.

It goes like this. Your task as a parent is to see the mind of your child beneath the behaviour. Let's say she says, "I really want a cookie. I really want a cookie," and she falls down kicking her legs." You can sit down next to her and go, "Yeah. Boy, wanting a cookie is such a big feeling that it's gotten you falling down on the floor, kicking your legs when I said we're not having a cookie till after dinner. See how big this wave of emotion is? It's big." "I want a cookie. I

want a cookie." Assuming she's not hurting herself, or you, or property, or something like that, then you have to make limits. Then you just say, you help her name it to tame it. You're naming the emotional state. Right?

Now, this may be different from other approaches to parenting that you have in Australia. Where, "No, you don't name states. You don't try to guess at the mind beneath behaviour." I understand that someone would give a consequence, and give a timeout, and all this stuff.

Our approach is really about looking deeply at the interaction and realising your task as a parent is to stay with your child so they learn, not that you're reinforcing "bad behaviour," but that you see their emotions beneath their behaviour. What that child gets, instead of just learning to regulate their actions, they learn to get insight into their mental state. That's an internal resource that just behavioural control does not give them.

Elise: Yeah. So, your response to someone that would say, if a child is tantruming, big emotions, crying because there's a no, "What about just walking out and letting them settle?" What would your response be to that? I'm being devil's advocate.

Dan: Listen, there are times for different approaches to parenting. Let's take this cookie example, just to continue with it, your daughter. Right? Let's say she falls down and starts tantruming. You know inside of you as her mum that there is a different rule. "What's the rule? No cookies before dinner." Unless having a reverse dinner. Sometimes that's fun to do too. "You're not having cookies before dinner." That's an unchangeable rule. That's the way you're doing it. She says, "Then I'm not going to have dinner." You go, "Okay. If that's you want it." You're not going to force food down her throat. She's not going to have dinner. You stay clear. She can do fine without her dinner. Whatever. You're just really clear about it.

What you're doing is you're teaching her that you, her mum, can see beneath the chaotic or rigid behaviour. You have these three zones. You have this optimal zone of connecting and collaborating the yes brain zones. When you're out of that yes brain zone, you're in reactivity or chaos or rigidity, which we call this red zone for chaos, the blue zone for rigidity. Optimally, we want to be in the balance, that's the B for BRIE.

Sometimes kids get out of it. Now, your kid's trantruming and all that stuff. You don't have to tantrum because she's tantruming. You can understand she has an emotional state that's put her into this chaotic, emotional place, and so you say, "Yeah. I see how big this is for you."

When you look at the social brain, you realise that the way this young baby, toddler, preschooler, school-aged kid, adolescent, adult, your partner, all these things, the way we know each other is through the facial expressions, the eye contact, the tone of voice, the non-verbal ways where someone sees us. There's no better gift to start with in parenting than seeing the mind of the child. Right? You say, "I see your emotions are big." It doesn't have to be, "I know you are having a particular sadness at this moment.' No. It doesn't have to be so specific

that you can be absolutely wrong. You just know your child's having a big emotion. Emotion being a state in which the body is influencing the brain and the head, and it arises from feelings your having, and all these things. So, you say it's a big emotion. You know you're going to be accurate. Mindsight is not always exactly accurate. In this case, you know your child's having a big emotion, and it's good to name it big emotion.

At this moment then, what has happened in that transaction, it is discipline means teaching, not punishment. Disciplines means teaching. A disciple is a student. Offering discipline is offering a teaching opportunity. That moment, cookie request, "Yeah, that would be so much fun, but no we're not going to do it." You did the yes brain approach. She still has a tantrum. Then you just say, "Wow, that's a really big emotion."

If you do something like this to yourself, Elise, "I'm such a bad parent. My god, I'm a therapist, and here's my two-year-old…" Is this your first child?

Elise: Yeah.

Dan: Yeah. Okay. So, you're "Oh, my god. Can't I parent? I can't even get my two-year-old to eat dinner without a cookie. What have I done? Oh, my god. This is so terrible." So, you're freaking yourself out. Yeah. Then you can flip your lid. You go into chaos, rigidity, and stuff like that.

We need to be present, attuned, resonating, and develop trust. That's PART. Present means you're open and receptive to what your daughter's going through. That's the present. A is PART is you're attuning yourself. Maybe you're focusing attention on the internal world of your daughter, and of yourself. This is the inner personal attunement part.

Resonance means her feelings. "I really want cookies. My mum's not giving me cookies. Life is terrible. Life is terrible." You know? So, you're resonating with her frustration. You're resonating with her being out of control. It feels that way, but you're not becoming your daughter. A lot of parents either become the emotion of their kid – if the kid gets hurt, they get so agitated – or they completely shut off, and they don't feel anything. You need to work on your own balancing, where you're differentiated by length. That's called integrated. Now, you're resonating with your daughter. You see how frustrating it is. "You're just two, and you want a cookie. What's wrong with that? This is mean old mum. She's not giving us a cookie. Blah, blah, blah." You need to have the spaciousness to not beat up on yourself.

Then you develop trust. You say to your daughter, "This is super hard. You know? When you're ready to stop kicking your legs, I'm getting really hungry. I'm really interested in those cookies after dinner, but we have some great salad, and great quinoa, or whatever you're eating. We're going to have dinner soon. Oh, my god. There's a story I want to tell you about this incredible squirrel I saw in the tree, and I couldn't believe what this squirrel was doing." She stops kicking. She goes, "What did the squirrel do?" "That squirrel? Come on. Let's

go have dinner, and I'll tell you all about the squirrel." Then she goes to that squirrel.

She had her emotion. You didn't give her a consequence for her emotion. You didn't scream or yell at her and saying she's stupid. She had big emotions. Great. Beautiful.

Elise: Thank you so much for that. I'm going to take that back, and my daughter's going to be the beneficiary of that.

For people that don't have a child, I feel like this cookie scenario could be applicable in workplaces, in intimate partnerships where somehow we tend to be the least effective at communication, often, when things, where there are high stakes. I guess, for someone that doesn't have a child, but let's say, has a reactive moment in partnership, whether that's intimate or work, how would this look?

Dan: If you think about this optimal balance, that's the balance part of BRIE. Resilience means you come back to balance when you're out of it. If you're an adult, let's say, without kids, and this is the issue, part of this is what you would call mindsight: seeing the mind. It's insight, empathy – the last of BRIE we'll get into. Part of this is saying, "You have this incredible opportunity to develop the ability to be within your mind, and to sense the mind of someone else."

I know we're talking about mindfulness, and Mindfulness in May, and this kind of thing. If you go to my website, you can see, for those who are contemplative practitioners, this thing called the wheel of awareness. The wheel is a very simple metaphor for there being a hub and a rim. The hub is the experience of being aware, the rim is that which you're aware of.

Let's say you have an adult version of the cookie thing. I don't know what it would be.

Elise: Let's come up with a practical one so people can relate. Like, "You didn't clean up the kitchen."

Dan: With your partner?

Elise: Yeah.

Dan: Okay.

Elise: "Why didn't you clean up the kitchen? Blah, blah, blah, blah."

Dan: "You didn't clean up the kitchen. What's wrong with you? This kitchen is so dirty."

Elise: "I told you so many times. Why don't you clean up the kitchen?" Something like that.

Dan: Right. It's understandable if, in the middle of nowhere, someone says, "Why didn't you clean up the kitchen?" You go, "What?" You become reactive. You could enter a no brain state. When you realise, you're in either chaos or rigidity, like, saying, "Shut up. I didn't have to clean up the kitchen," or you just

withdraw. That's the rigidity in the withdrawal or the chaos in just yelling back. You're out of balance.

Part of what you need to as task of resilence is realise, "Whoa! I just yelled at my partner who's yelling at me from the kitchen." This is now no brain/no brain. That's the problem no brain communication is it both gets reactivity to reactivity. It's part of the idea of war.

You can say, "I need to just take a quick break." Not, "I'm going to go away for five weeks and come back to you." "I'm going to take a quick break." Take yourself into another room. Take some deep breathing, focus on your breath. Realise that if you come back with reactivity to someone who's reactive, it is going to go nowhere productive. That's just the truth.

Now, maybe your partner had a bad day. Maybe he or she was not treated well at work. Maybe they're hungry. Maybe they didn't sleep well the night before. Maybe they turned the news. These days, all you have to do is turn on the news, and you're put into a no brain state. Here in California, we have all these fires going on, and everyone's on edge since you smelled smoke. What happens is you have this reactivity that's right there. Part of the task of the wheel would be to say from the hub of my wheel awareness, "I can sense the reactivity that's out here on the rim, and I don't have to be taken over by it." It's a differentiation of the knowing and awareness from the knowing on the rim.

What this does for you is it allows you to say, "Hey, I was imbalanced when I came home. My partner started yelling at me for not cleaning up the kitchen. She's got her own issues about a clean kitchen. I was really distracted with something at work, or someone called me. It is true. I had dinner or a snack, or whatever, and I left all the stuff. I know she doesn't like that. She likes things organised. Let me find out the meaning of that. Actually, I already know the meaning of me not respecting her need for a clean kitchen."

You've now brought yourself back into balance. You're now in the hub of your mind. You see on your part of you wants to say, "Don't yell at me like that." Part of you wants to say, "I was distracted" and defend yourself. Another part of you on the – when you're in the hub, you can see all these things – this is now the insight of the BRIE thing. You have balance, resilience, you've brought yourself back into balance. Now the insight is, "What's going on with me? What's going on with me is that I don't like to be yelled at. It feels really bad, and it puts me into that chaos and rigidity of reactivity. I need to try to stay balanced now. I feel bad when I made a mistake. She's absolutely right. I shouldn't have left dishes where it's dried onto the plates. But, I did get distracted. The first thing I think I'm going to do, because I know now" – here's the E of empathy – "I know she likes things maybe cleaner than I do. I really want to have her understand that I respect her desires, even though they're different from my standards of what a kitchen should be. I really agreed to do it, and I didn't. I messed, so I need to apologise."

I go back, and I said, "I'm sorry, we're having a disagreement. You're right. I should have cleaned up, and I didn't. I'm not going to explain why. I'm happy to tell you what happened. You were absolutely right, and I'm sorry."

That is a yes brain approach when it's started with a reactive no brain entrée. Your partner didn't come to you and say, "Excuse, Dan," or, "Elise, excuse me. It's giving me a feeling of being not respected and not really cared for by seeing the plate there. Would you mind in the future? I'm sure you had a good reason for that."

Elise: This is like the utopian world.

Dan: Right. This is where you get the whole thing. You get the balance, resilience, insight, and empathy. Doing things like the wheel of awareness for us as adults is really helpful because you pull yourself out of the rim of reactivity, that can be reactivity, into this spaciousness of the hub, and then you're able to make more choices.

Elise: Fantastic. Thank you.

You've alluded already to the zones, which I thought was, really, very accessible and practical in your book. Do you want to just clarify in a little bit more detail the red, green, and blue zones, and how they relate to resilience?

Dan: I think it's petty common in various approaches to realise we get into different states. Think of it like a river. The central state of this river flowing is the flow of the river. We're going to call it the green state, green for go. This is the yes brain state where you're integrated. Integrated means differentiated and linking. It's how you optimise what's called the self-organisation of a complex system. You don't need to worry about that, but there's a whole science behind what I'm saying.

This integrated flow is flexible, it's adaptive, it has a resilience called coherence, it's energised, it's stable. That spells the word FACES: flexible, adaptive, coherent, energised, and stable. It's flowing in this harmonious way.

Elise: Can I just interject for listeners? Would you say that's a human being in its balanced setting?

Dan: Totally. Absolutely. Like right now, hopefully, you and I are in that state. We're integrated. It allows your nervous system to be coordinated/balanced with your whole body. It allows two people to be coordinated/balanced with each other. That's what integration allows. Harmony arrises where two people, let's say communicating with each other, you create something larger than any of the single people alone create. It's a synergy, and it's a beautiful thing. If you think about a choir singing in harmony, it's literally what harmony is: different harmonic intervals, but singing together.

Sometimes you get thrown out of that harmonious flow of integration. It happens, interestingly, when you block differentiation or block linkage. That's just the science of it. The feeling of it is, amazingly – picture a river – you go either to one bank of chaos and one bank of rigidity.

In some models, it's not exactly like this, but they might say chaos is hyper-arousal, and rigidity it hypo-arousal. It's a little more complicated than that, but that's a parallel way of thinking about it. You can see, if you think about this river image, you have three different areas. You have the central flow of a yes brain integration. We'll call it the green zone. You have one bank, you have the river, this space of chaos. Somehow, people associate red with chaos, so we call it the red zone. Then there's the cold, frozen, rigid, snowy, not changing, inflexible zone of rigidity. Somehow, people associate blue with that. You can make it whatever colours you want, but that's why we came up with these colours the way they are: green for go, and red for chaos, and blue for rigidity.

Ultimately, you could reduce it to two states: a reactive state, that could be either chaotic, or rigid, or both; and a harmonious state of receptivity. It's receptivity versus reactivity.

Elise: This also aligns with our nervous system, right? The different states that underpin this emotion is that sympathetic, that fight/flight, aroused.

Dan: That's it. I'm a founding editor for the Norton Series of Interpersonal Neurobiology. We have 60 textbooks you could read if you want to. One of the textbooks is called *The Polyvagal Theory*, by Steve Porges. The other textbook that Steve wrote is called *The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory*. Either one, you'll see the neuroscience about what's called the social engagement system, which is when we're in the yes brain state, versus these reactive states of fight, freeze, and faint. The fight, flight, and freeze are the autonomic nervous system's sympathetic reactions turned on.

The faint is the dorsal branch of the vagus nerve, the tenth cranial nerve, so that's a part of the parasympathetic. It's a little complicated, because when you're relaxed and calm, it's the ventral branch of the vagus nerve. But, when you're reacting with a collapse in rigidity and fainting, then that can be either the dorsal branch of the vagus nerve, or it could be an activated kind of rigidity, which is called freeze. People don't realise there's the sympathetic, accelerating-driven, energy consuming freezing up tight. "I'm not going to move. I'm not going to do this." That's a freeze. Then there's what we're calling faint, or feigning death, dorsal branch of the vagus nerve, and sometimes called the dorsal dive, because it's the dorsal branch of the vagus nerve, and then you collapse. It's sometimes called feigning death or folding. It's where you're facing a feeling of helplessness, and you just collapse. It's different from the energising kind of rigidity. Either one is a kind of rigidity.

Elise: Thank you for clarifying that, because I think Steve Porges work is really, really fascinated. It illuminates this whole stress response.

Dan: Yeah. Exactly.

Elise: The listeners can follow-up on that.

Dan: For anyone: with kids, without kids, anyone who once was a kid. The issue here is that if we've had repeated activations of these in our own childhood, then as we go through adolescence, we're more prone to being in those states. Then in

adulthood, the way to the think about it is, a repeated state becomes a trait. If you have a trait to do one of these things – become chaotic, become rigid, either way, it's a form of reactivity – you're more likely to go there quickly, with less provocation, more tensely, stay there longer. As you try to get out of it and come back to balance, you're more prone to coming back into it. It may make it harder for you to make a repair, because you may justify, "That's just the way I am. That's my personality. It's good." When in fact, actually, is a learned form of no brain reactivity that's actually not very good for you. You can change it. That's the thing. Even if adults do the yes brain book, they can learn to change their own brain.

Elise: Which is so optimistic and hopeful for all of us.

Dan: Yeah. It is. You might think that you are what you are and you cannot change, but research is very clear about that. It's super clear now. You can change how you are and your tendencies, your proclivities, your traits. The reason is because of something called neuroplasticity. If you do mindfulness practice, if you do strategies like we have in the book, or the wheel of awareness, it's integrated practice, you do these things, and you do them repeatedly, you're going to intentionally create a state. Where attention goes, neuro-firing flows, and neuro-connection grows. This is where you systematically, with intention, strategically: where attention goes, train your attention. Neuro-firing flows to create a state, your neuro-connection grows. When you're in repeated states, it becomes a trait. It's that simple.

What we need to do is inspire – what we say here at the Mindsight Institute, is inspire people to rewire their brains. In particular, inspire to rewire toward integration.

Elise: That's a wonderful summary. Thank you so much. Really, really optimistic and hopeful for everyone.

Dan: Yeah.

Elise: There's so much much in that book, so I'm excited for the listeners to actually track it down. I really feel like it's a must. It's an essential read. It really, really is.

Dan: Great.

Elise: I wanted to just finish off, there was a line in a book I loved, which was, "Reactivity blocks resilience, and receptivity promotes it."

Dan: Yes. Exactly.

Elise: Can you just explain that line? It was a wonderful line.

Dan: Just like we're talking about, Elise. With reactivity, you're shutting off your social engagement system. Let's say we're partners or something and I'm reacting to you. I'm not going to be really interested in what's going on inside of you. I'm going to be, "Shh," like this to you. Reactivity is going to really shut down your experience to be open and engaged, so you're going to become reactive. Neither of us is going to show any sign of resilience. Resilience being

when there's a challenge to our state of being in the green zone, being integrated. How do come back to balance? It just makes it really, really hard to do that when you're reactive.

Receptivity, in contrast, allows us to say, "Wow! What's going on in Elise right now? I may be feeling this and that, but I wonder what she's feeling." That's the social engagement system. What's really fascinating about it – and I talk about this in a book called *Aware: The Science and Practice of Presence* – when you study the origins of consciousness in human beings, the ability for us to be self-aware, to have awareness, it looks like, in evolutionary terms, we first began to play with consciousness by being aware of another person's mind. We're very collaborative creatures because of something called alloparenting. We share our parenting with each other. We look to people in our village. Say, "What's their attention on? What's their intention? What's in their awareness?" Those three things, attention, intention, and awareness, those three things are the mind, the mental experience of a person.

We then developed neuro machinery to figure out those three things in another person. Then we used the same circuitry to look at the same things in ourselves. "What's my attention on? Where's my intention? What am I aware of?" Those these things.

Even if you look at mindfulness training, what's really interested about that is the three pillars of mindfulness training that research shows are important components of it are training focused attention, zeroing in on one thing and returning when you get distracted. Open awareness, which is allowing awareness to be open, and just experiencing a differentiation of the thing you're aware of from pure awareness. So, focused attention, open awareness. The third pillar is, I call it kind intention. It's like loving kindness. This idea of bringing positive regard to inner and inter experiences of the mind.

Those three pillars are exactly what we want to do in bringing a yes brain state into the world. How do you focus attention? What's actually going on in my body? That's focused attention. How do I open up awareness, so I'm not swept up by reactivity? Kind intention is, "Wow! You just wanted me to clean up the dishes. My kind regard for you is a deep respect for what has real meaning for you. You probably had a rough day, so you were talking to me that way." That way, when I come to you, it's completely different from how I could fight back in a reactive state. That's how receptive cultivates resilience.

Elise: Thank you. One other thing in your book, we probably don't have time to cover it now, but you talk about the spectator and the player. Listeners can learn more about through reading the book. Essentially this notion being able to witness our experience and our emotional state so that we have a different perspective and some more space in order to manage that reactivity, if that's correct.

Dan: Yeah. Exactly. One example is a kindergarten teacher talked to me a bit a little boy, a five-year-old boy who's kicked out of one school, sent to her kindergarten class in a different school. She taught him the wheel of awareness. The spectator would be like the hub. The player would be the rim. This boy was in the yard,

and a kid took his block, and he was going to hit him. He always had done this, his whole life. Only the teacher had taught him this wheel of awareness drawing. When he came to the teacher and said, "You need to give me a time to take a break, because I'm lost on my rim," meaning he was a player, "I need to get back to my hub," meaning I need to be more of the spectator. "Because the player is going to punch that kid, and I'm going to get kicked out of another school." By differentiating the hub from the rim, or this spectator in the hub from the rim, the player, the feelings the intense thing you could have, he was able to actually get incredible strength and stay receptive.

Elise: That's an incredible story.

Dan: Yeah. Amazing, isn't it?

Elise: For someone that's five, to be able to take these skills on board.

I question I had that often comes up is, what's the difference between being the spectator, i.e., when we're in an emotion, "Anger's here, and I'm angry, and this is feeling like this," versus dissociation?

Dan: It's a really fantastic question. Let me try to approach it this way. Let's look at Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi notion of flow, where you are becoming really one with the sensory flow of what's going on, and lose a sense of separate self from playing tennis, or playing chess, or making love, or going for a walk on the beach, or whatever. You're in the flow of experience. It's a beautiful thing. Great.

Now, that's not the same as mindful awareness, for example, although a lot of people equate them. I once had Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on a panel with Salzberg, and I asked them this: is flow mindfulness? They all agreed, no. You can choose to be in flow from a mindful state, but if you're, for example, furious with someone and you have a gun in your hands, you could be in the flow of your anger and shoot them. With mindful awareness, in contrast, you may have chosen to be in the flow, something happens, and you're really angry, and you have a gun, or bat, or whatever, but another aspect of your mind is not just with the sensory flow of your anger, it's with a sense of ethics, or a sense of disconnection enough so it's an observer, the spectator who's not in the game who says, "Shooting that person is bad thing to do. I will not follow that impulse." This is why we agreed, mindfulness awareness includes the capacity to separate a little bit.

You're asking a really important question. How does that differ from dissociation? I work a lot with people who have dissociation.

Elise: Which is why I was really interested in hearing your perspective on this.

Dan: First of all, it's a really important question your asking, Elise, because, for some people, they can use mindfulness training as a form of dissociation. I'll give you an example of it in a moment. It's a vulnerability of the mindfulness training, for sure. I think it's a really important potential downside. It's a negative side effect.

For those who don't know what dissociation is, if you take the word dis-association, and just take the A out and make it dissociation, you can understand

how clinicians use it. Usually, things that are associated, like feelings and thoughts, can become dissociated. Usually, consciousness with a sense of self is associated. You can dissociate those. Memory and consciousness usually associated, you can dissociate them. Association has all of these components.

At the extreme, you can see it as multiple personalities, called dissociative identity disorder that comes from the experience of early trauma before the age of seven. Other people have more subtle things of feeling like things are not real, they can feel disconnected from their body, they can feel psychogenic amnesia, they can't remember things. One aspect of those forms of clinical dissociation is it comes from a blockage to the usually associated things.

What we're talking about, and this is a huge difference, is in mindful awareness that is not dissociative, you are able to differentiate the experience of knowing in the hub, if you will, from the knowns on the rim of this metaphoric wheel of awareness, and link them with a spoke of attention by your choice.

For example, if I'm, walking down the street and I stub my toe really badly, I can get totally lost in the pain of my foot and be unable to continue. Or, if I need to continue, I can move into my hub, distance myself from the pain. What research shows is that I can even decrease the registration of pain in my brain. Literally. If I'm in a scanner, you could prove that. That's a useful way of decreasing a negative input.

Dissociation would be where I can completely block out the feeling of my toe. Then I block it from memory because I feel so bad about stubbing my toe. Then the toe gets infected because I didn't take care of it because I forgot about it. That's dissociation. Whereas the other is a mindful awareness of the pain in my toe.

To give you just one quick example. I once took care of a meditation teacher. He said, "I'm not going to talk about my past, because I don't do that. I'm just living in the present." It turned out, he was severely abused. That would be a good example of dissociation. He was using mindfulness to dissociate from making a coherent narrative of his life. You really want to clarify.

Elise: Thank you so much. I think what you're saying there highlights that thing about choice. Do you have the choice? Rather than in dissociation it's an automatic protective mechanism that we might have learnt from previous trauma.

Dan: Exactly.

Elise: Dan, just to finish off, I wanted to ask you a question I'm asking all of the guests, which is if you were to have a dinner party next week, and you could invite a handful of people that were thinkers, or writers or thinkers that have touched you in some way in your life and expanded your own mind – either alive or not alive, known to you or not – who would you invite to the table?

Dan: Oh, my gosh. That's a hard question to answer. I would certainly invite you, Elise.

Elise: Thanks.

Dan: I don't know. I would certainly invite my friend, John O'Donohue, who passed ten years ago. A bunch of people. Joan Halifax. I'd invite Sharon Salzburg. I would invite Jack Kornfield and Jon Kabat-Zinn, and Ritchie Davidson. Probably invite a bunch of poets. Probably some comedians too.

Elise: Like who?

Dan: Oh, my gosh. Certainly, Ruby Wax, I would invite, who is also a mindfulness teacher. People like that. Carolyn Welsh. I'd invite her.

Elise: Beautiful. Well, it sounds like it would be a wonderful evening.

As we finish, I just wanted to offer you space, if there was anything else that we haven't covered that you wanted to share with the listeners.

Dan: No. I think we've covered a lot. Thank you very much, Elise. Thanks everyone for checking out *The Yes Brain*, and *Aware*. It's been great to chat.

Elise: Thank you so much for you time, Dan.

Dan: Thank you, Elise.