MINDFUL
IN MAY

Dr. Elise Bialylew, founder of Mindful in May (mindfulinmay.org) and The Mind Life Project (www.mindlifeproject.com) and author of The Happiness Plan, interviews Linda Graham.

Linda Graham, is an experienced psychotherapist in private practice in the San Francisco Bay Area. She integrates modern neuroscience, mindfulness practices, and relational psychology into her nationwide trainings. She is the author of Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well-Being.

Elise: Welcome, Linda, to the program. I'm delighted to have the opportunity to chat with you. I know the listeners are going to find so much value from your teaching. Thank you for being here.

Linda: Thank you, Elise, for having me. It's really a privilege for me too. Thank you.

Elise: For those who may not know of your work, you wrote a really fascinating practical and insightful book called *Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well-Being*. I just wondered, to begin with, if you could actually share what your definition of resilience is.

Linda: The shortcut definitions that I use are: bouncing back from adversity; coping skilfully with challenges and crises; being able to respond flexibly to any disappointment, or difficulty, or disaster. Actually, there's new definitions of resilience emerging in the research field. It

used to be that resilience was thought of as a rather static, genetically determined trait of grit, or determination, or the will to survive, the will to endure.

Now, people are more and more seeing resilience as the capacity to respond to external stressors, whatever those external stressors are. It could be losing a job, or losing a home, or losing a relationship, or losing your health, being in a car accident. Whatever the external stressor is, the internal response, of being able to notice what's happening, and stay present for what's happening, and be able to make wise choices to respond flexibly, is seen as the definition of resilience.

There are some catch phrases that summarise that. Jon Kabat-Zinn says, "You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf." My friend, Janet Freeman, says, "Catch the moment. Make a choice." Then the environmental activist, Julia Butterfly Hill says, "Every moment has a choice. Every choice has an impact." When you put it that way: "Catch the moment. Make a choice." "Every moment has a choice. Every choice has an impact." My colleague, Frankie Perez summarises it: "How you respond to the issue is the issue."

Elise: That's very powerful.

Linda: We're looking at strengthening people's capacity to cope with whatever is happening in ways that are actually adaptive, and skilful, and flexible.

Elise: What sets up the difference between someone who has this capacity for greater resilience versus someone who tends to really get pummelled and fall into a great load of difficult with external challenges?

Linda: Resilience is a capacity innate in the brain. It develops as all capacities do, early on, in our interactions with the people closest around us:

parents and caregivers. We learn to speak the language that our parents are speaking. We learn to manage our emotions if our parents can do that for themselves and for us. We learn to be resilient if our parents can cope with whatever is going on their lives, and support us, encouraging us to also be resilient and cope well.

The early attachment experiences, whatever they are, secure or insecure, shape the development of the brain. They shape the maturation of the structures of the brain that we use for resilience. Primarily, the prefrontal cortex, the higher part of the brain, the centre of executive functioning, which has many, many functions. It allows us to regulate the body and the nervous system. It allows us to quell the fear response of the amygdala. It allows us to attune and empathise with ourselves as well as other people, so we know what's going on, we know what's going on with them. It gives us a sense of self-awareness and who we are as we move through the world. It is also the structure response flexibility. The stronger that part of our brain is in its functioning, the more resilient we're going to be able to be.

Interestingly, since we're talking about mindfulness here, mindfulness is a key practice that strengths the functioning of that part of the brain. The more we can train our minds to pause, and be aware, and notice what's happening, and notice our reactions to what's happening, and create a little bit of space between ourselves and what's happening, we just get to reflect and get a little distance. Then that actually allows us to shift perspectives, to see options, to make wise choices. That's one of the functions of the centre of executive functioning, is to see our choices and to make wise choices.

Elise: That's really beautifully articulated, in terms of the relationship between relationships, resilience, and mindfulness.

Linda: Absolutely, right. Our capacities develop in the earliest relationships we have, and they will stay pretty much stable well into adulthood unless there's intervention. Fortunately, as we grow up, we get to interact with all kinds of people: with siblings, and peers in school, and teachers, and coaches, and romantic partners, and therapists. We get to interact with lots of people who might be resilient in themselves, and then we learn how to do that from interacting with them.

Elise: What you're saying there, that there is this resilience that can develop and be nurtured through the attachments and through the relationships we grew up with. If we happen to not have that fortune, and there's more chaos, and for whatever reason, our parents never had resilience taught to them, and so couldn't support that in us, there's ways that we can build and learn that skill throughout the lifetime.

Linda: Absolutely. One of the things that Dan Siegel at UCLA always teaches, or always encourages, because the brain is a social organ, to hang out with healthy brains. To hang out with people who can be reflective, who can be empathic, who can be compassionate, who can be generous. To hang out with people, and we begin to develop those capacities ourselves from being in a resonate relationship with them.

Elise: Beautiful.

You talk in your book about the Cs of resilience. There were five, and I think there are six now, I'm not sure. Would you mind sharing what they are?

Linda: I do now have six when I teach workshops. I teach them all over my country, all over the world now, really. The first C is calm, because we need to be in our baseline physiological equilibriums called the window of tolerance. We need to be in this baseline equilibrium where the brain feels safe. When the brain feels safe, we're not too revved up, we're not too shut down, then it can be open to learning. That's what actually primes the neuroplasticity of the brain to create new patterns and to create new habits. The first quality is calm, to feel safe. There are exercises that I teach people all the time to do that.

The second one, that is compassion. As we're being mindful and aware of our experience, we need to have compassion for ourselves for feeling that experience in order to be able to tolerate it, in order to be able to be with it. I teach a lot of tools of mindful self-compassion so people can stay with their experience. Not run away from it, but not be fluttered or hijacked by it either.

Then I teach about connections, because to be able to find refuge with other people, to find resources with other people, to be able to simply learn from other people is really key to creating changes in the brain.

Then clarity, because we do need to be able to reflect, and look backwards and forwards, and integrate all of the experiences, all of the events. I do teach mindfulness directly to lead to that kind of clarity.

Then I teach competence, because it's really important that we develop a sense of mastery, a sense of skill, a sense of competence. Trust in ourselves that we can meet whatever situation's going to come at us.

Then courage. That we have that inner strength, that inner secure base of resilience, to actually take the wise action, to take the courageous action

that we need to take. Those are the six Cs that I lead people in the workshops through, and lead readers of the book through.

Elise: These are the elements that, when followed, build resilience.

Linda: Right, absolutely. Yes.

Elise: As I said, I found the practices in your book really, really helpful. There were so many beautiful practices in there. I wondered if you would, just for the sake of the listeners, be able to share a couple of those practices that stand out. You mentioned the calm, but perhaps also the self-compassion.

Linda: They go together. The first tool that I always teach clients or workshop participants is hand on the heart, because it will work instantly. To place the hand on the heart centre and feel the warm touch of the hand. To be able to breathe gently and deeply into the heart centre, which activates the parasympathetic branch of the nervous system. It's the calming branch of the nervous system. Then to breathe in a sense of ease, or safety, or trust, or goodness into the heart centre, which begins to put the brakes on our automatic survival responses.

Then to take one moment to remember a moment in a relationship. Not the whole relationship, but just a moment when you felt safe, and loved, and cherished. When you remember that moment, and it could be with a spouse or a child, it could be with a good friend or a therapist, it could be a spiritual figure, and it could be a pet. You remember this moment of feeling safe, and love, and cherished. That activates the release of oxytocin, which is the brain's hormone of safety and trust, of bonding and belonging. It's the brain's direct intermediate antidote to the stress hormone, cortisol.

When people do an exercise like hand on the heart, they can begin to calm themselves down physiologically, but also emotionally, and come back to a sense of equilibrium. That with can be combined with the self-compassion break. Where you pause and notice if there's any suffering, any upset, any startle, any distress. Offer yourselves the self-compassion break.

This is based on the work of Kristin Neff, at the University of Texas in Austin, and Christopher Germer at Harvard. They developed this whole mindful self-compassion protocol. The self-compassion break is simply, "Ouch! This hurts. This is hard. This is painful."

Lately, I've been saying to myself, "I'm not happy." That just cues me to do the practice. Then the practice is simply phrases that shift the functioning of the brain in that moment. "May I be kind to myself in this moment?" "May I accept this moment exactly as it is?" That's the mindfulness. "May I accept myself exactly as I am in this moment?" That's the self-compassion. "May I give myself all the compassion and courageous action that I need?" By saying those phrases, you actually shift the functioning of the brain out of contraction and reactivity into more openness, into the larger picture, into a bigger perspective. That leads to resilience. Resilience is a direct outcome of doing a practice like that. Those are among the first things that I teach people that I'm working with.

Another thing that is easy for people to do is, if they're feeling some difficult negative or afflictive emotion in their body, to let themselves feel that in their body. Then to let their body move to whatever the opposite posture is. You don't even have to know what to call it, or what to name it, but you move to the opposite posture. You can go back and

forth a few times, and then you come to something in the middle. You're actually shifting the physiological state of the body, which will shift your emotions, which will shift the brain, which will shift how you behave.

Amy Cuddy, at Harvard Business School, now teaches the positive part of that, power posing, to get people's energy, to get people's sense of empowerment and strength up before they go into a business meeting, or a court, or a job interview, or anything like that. We learn how to work with the body-brain to create the shifts in the brain functioning that actually help us be open to experience, open to learning, open to new choices. That supports our resilience.

Elise: I love this phrase, "the body-brain," because I think so many of us live in this cerebral world. I think it's very easy for all of us … I know for myself, meditation probably helped me the most, in term of actually understanding and sensing that we are a body-brain. It's all so intimately connected. When you talk about this putting your hand on your heart, or the postures that we can take, I think for many people, if you're newer to this, it can sound almost a little bit strange, or, "Is that really going to do anything?" Because we're so disconnected from the fact that the body, and the emotions, and all of it is connected. What's your perspective on that?

Linda: One thing modern neuroscience does is illuminate for us how the brain works. We begin to learn that all of our signals of safety or danger come from the body: they come from the lower brain, they come from the brain stem. That doesn't even have to be a conscious process. We can have a reaction of fear, or anger, or sadness, without even consciously

first knowing what it is that's causing that response. The information comes from the body.

The reason we use our mindfulness and our compassion, which happen to be two of the most powerful agents of brain change known to science. There's really good research data now about why those are important practices to use. We use the mindfulness and compassion to be able to consciously open to the information that's coming to us. "Gee, I feel all contracted," or, "I feel all agitated," or, "I just want to throw something across the room." What's going on? The mindfulness and the compassion allows us to pause and explore that. Have some compassion for ourselves, rather than going into the inner critic mode and beating ourselves up for reacting that way. Keeping things open, and kind, and generous, and responsive, so that we can shift and choose a different way to behave if we need to, instead of going down the rabbit hole of beating ourselves up for half an hour and not doing anything useful.

Elise: Absolutely. How powerful that is in the context of relationships. Whether that's intimate life-long partnerships or parent relationships. As a reasonably new mother myself, I know the reality of those intense emotions and how they can come up. Just having these tools to be able to manage in those moments of reactivity is so useful.

Linda: Part of what I do teach, I do now in the workshops teach semantic intelligence, body-based intelligence, emotional intelligence, and how we manage these waves of emotions, and how we use positive emotions to become more resilient. Also, relational intelligence. That includes intrapersonal, how we relate to ourselves, and then interpersonal, how we relate to other people. Very often, we'll relate to ourselves more harshly than we relate to other people. Some of these practices are

designed to heal that intrapersonal relationship, so that in fact, we can be more resilient when we're dealing with other people. Then there's the reflective intelligence, the mindfulness that holds it all together.

Elise: Can I ask you, with this piece on resilience, and these practices you talk about, as humans, we're all going to experience suffering of some sort. When you use the word trauma, it can obviously be from a more minor disappointment to a disastrous kind of trauma. For those that have experienced some kind of trauma, like a relationship loss, or a death, where there can be a tendency to potentially have triggers or flashbacks. Or the rumination of, "What if this," or "What if I'd done this?" Really getting lost in the past. You've shared the practices, but how would someone manage in that moment? In order to turn that moment of almost being caught in traumatic rumination, and moving into something more generative, something more healing. As I think, you speak to it, post-traumatic growth, almost. Using that as an opportunity for growth, rather than getting caught.

Linda: Right. This is a large topic. Again, the trauma researchers are now beginning to define trauma, not so much in the outer event – the death of a loved one, or a terminal diagnosis, or losing your financial wherewithal – but how we respond. In other words, the same event can happen to different people, and different people will respond differently. The same event could happen to us at different times in our lives, and depending on how resourced we are, we could go into trauma or not. Again, the focus becomes on the internal response.

There are tools that we use, in the moment, to shift out of the reactivity, the revving up, or the shutting down, the collapsing, the numbing up, the dissociating, so we're frozen. There are tools we can use in the moment

to come back to the larger perspective. Now, this is not meant as a bypass at all. This is actually a very important part of trauma therapy, is to be able to have positive moments, positive experiences, even a positive memory when something really disastrous is happening and we're in the thick of it. To remember people who are supporting us, or remember times that we have coped before, or remember resources that we have that we need to draw on now. Using the positive to antidote the falling down the rabbit hole of the negative is a very important part of it.

We also, then, maybe spend a fair amount of our adult lives rewiring the old patterns. We can get trigger now, but it's a trigger of a previous memory, of a previous event. We may hear a car door slam now and have a reaction. If, when we were six years old, the car door slamming meant daddy was coming home drunk, we're going to have a different trigger, a different reaction. An important part of any resilience work is going back and uncovering, surfacing those implicit patterns of reactivity, or behaviour, or belief, and being able to rewire them.

This is a tool that I suggest to clients, not just in the moment, not when something bad is going on in the moment, but to go back and rewire some of the previously traumatising experiences. I ask them to remember a moment when an interaction between them and another person went awry. Not the worst thing in the world, but something that they wound up feeling badly about themselves. They evoke that entire negative memory of who they were with, and what that person said, and what they said, and what the other person did, and what they did, and how it all made them feel. They evoke the entire neural-constellation that's holding together that memory.

Then, because juxtaposing a positive experience with a negative will rewire the negative when it's strong enough, I have them create a positive experience with me, in a session. Begin to imagine a different ending to that scenario. It doesn't matter if it never could have happened in real life. Just begin to imagine a different ending to that scenario, because what we imagine in our brain is real to the brain. You begin to imagine something different they could have said, or you could have said, even if that never could have happened. Something different they could have done, or you could have done. Somebody who wasn't even there at the time comes in and does something useful. You begin to get a new ending, a more satisfactory resolution, in your imagination. You begin to get the feeling of what that feels like, and how you feel about yourself, what your thoughts are about yourself. You've created a positive resource, and you really hang out for a while in the felt sense of that positive ending, that positive resource.

Then you go back for a moment and remember the original negative memory. Tune into it. You let it go, and you come back to the positive. You do that toggling back and forth several times until you finally just rest in the positive. Eventually, that will rewire the old memory. It doesn't rewrite history, but it does rewire our relationship to that history. It doesn't change what happened, but it changes how we view what happens. Eventually, that memory is, "Yeah, that happened. It was hard at the time. Yuck! This really sucked. Now I'm okay, because now I have these other resources, I have these other tools." I do that again, and again, and again with clients so that they can see that they can change the patterns in their brain that's holding those memories and their relationship to those memories. Yes, we're looking for tools that would

help us be resilient in the moment, but also tools that will help us rewire previous moments, so they no longer derail us, they no longer hijack us.

Elise: It's absolutely fascinating, what you said, that actually for the brain, even though that other positive ending didn't happen, just the mere fact of playing that through the brain in some ways tricks the brain, or for the brain, that can then become a new wiring.

Linda: It begins to create new neural pathways in the brain. It's not so much a trick. We can still remember what really happened. It creates new neural pathways so that when we are in a similar situation now, instead of going automatically down the old pathway, we have a chance of going down a new different pathway instead. "Wait a minute. Yeah, that person just frowned at me and called me a name, but I'm okay. I don't have to take that on." We can create new neural circuitry in the brain, and that's really the power of the neural plasticity, is to be able to do that. Again, mindfulness and self-compassion are powerful tools that we use to be able to rewire the brain like that.

Elise: It's so optimistic and hopeful, isn't it. It's so exciting to be living in this time where we actually have science, and a greater understanding of how we can turn things around for ourselves.

Linda: What's important about that is that there are hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds of studies now in neuroscience, but also in behavioural science, that give us the data to show that these tools actually work. It's not a blind optimism. It's actually grounded in science. I hope, that for my clients, and for the people that I teach, it's grounded in their own experience. They actually experience doing hand on the heart, or doing power pose, shifts their experience. They feel it. They can come to trust

that they can create that kind of change in their body and in their brain. That's what I mean by the competence.

Whenever I'm teaching all of these tools, I really try to reinforce for people that, yes, you learned a tool. You may also be learning that you are someone that can learn tools. That's the higher level. If I can learn a tool like hand on the heart or wish for outcome, then I can learn other tools as well. That helps us become more resilient, seeing ourselves in that way.

Elise: The confidence that builds around recognising that, actually, I can learn tools, and therefore when hardship comes to me, I will be okay. I will have tools and resources to manage that.

Linda: One of my favourite quotes is from the American novelist Louisa May Alcott. She said, "I'm no longer afraid of storms, for I'm learning how to sail my ship." We learn the skills that we need to sail our ship, because the storms will keep coming.

Elise: With what you were just saying then about toggling between the positive and the event, and recreating it in the mind. You have people that face significant traumas, but for people that are facing more everyday difficulties that they're stuck in. Like a relationship breakup. Where someone, they just can't let that go. There might be anger if someone's cheated. Just all the different things that happen in relationships. Would that practice be something that would be relevant in that context, or are you talking more for a severe kind of trauma?

Linda: This is what I'm teaching more and more. Just like mindfulness allows us to be aware of any content, mindfulness is a process that allows us to be aware of the sensations in our body. The emotions, the thoughts we

have about ourselves. The cascades of emotions that we go through. The patterns of thoughts we have about ourselves. It's the same mindfulness: studying the states of mind we're in, or the states of being we're in. Whatever the content is, the mindfulness can hold more and more complex objects of awareness.

The same with compassion. It may be easier for me to have compassion for my cat, or for my neighbour, or for my best friend. Then I try to expand that to parts of myself that I don't like so very much, or people that I work with that I don't like so very much, so it gets more complex.

Resilience is very, very similar. If we learn how to respond to losing our car keys without flying off the handle, or getting a disappointment, or someone broke a date with us, or missed an appointment with us. When we learn to handle the smaller content, it's the same process as being able to handle, eventually, a break-up of a relationship, or the death of a loved one, or living through a hurricane. It's the same process. We're strengthening it as we go along.

One thing that is important about this kind of resilience training, is that the brain learns best little and often. Small experiences, repeated again, and again, and again, and again. That's how the brain learns. For instance, you're actually going to get more benefit if you meditate for 10 minutes a day every day, then if you wait till the weekend and meditate for an hour. You're going to get more benefit from your gratitude practice, which opens you up to the larger perspective, if you do a gratitude journal every night of three things you're grateful for, rather than waiting till the weekend and doing it for half an hour. Little and often.

We're building our capacities of resilience little and often. I ask people to take note of whenever they actually did something skilfully. They're driving to work, and somebody cut them off, and they didn't rage or curse, they just met to their loving kindness and go on their way. Noticing when they actually are resilient. When they actually are coping well, and use that as a resource for themselves.

Elise: Acknowledging those moments builds that confidence as well, I imagine.

Linda: Exactly, right. Yes.

Elise: What about your perspectives on specifically for supporting children to be more resilient. I understand we've talked about the actual attachment, the quality of the attachment and the capacity of a parent to support that. Are there any specific practices, or ways that parents might support, actively, resilience in younger children?

Linda: You're pointing to the first thing, is for parents to be resilient themselves. That really is where it starts. In terms of supporting the child going through an experience, I think it goes in two different directions, depending on the age of the child. Being able to be resilient is both being able to meet a fear with safety, and to meet a fear with courage.

When the child is younger, like a six-year-old child, it's going to be about safety. It's going feel like, "Mummy and daddy are here, and they're holding me and comforting me. They're just helping me regroup so I can go back out into the playground." It's safety.

When it's 16 years old, then it's more about the courage to step out, and step forward, and meet whatever the challenge is. I think it's different,

depending on the age of the child. The key, really, is seeing parents be able to be resilient, and the child will learn that, almost from osmosis.

They used to tease, when I was in graduate school, that there's a direct IV line from the mother's prefrontal cortex to the baby's prefrontal cortex. It is so direct and so powerful. When parents model being calm, compassionate, connecting to resources, they're not flailing about trying to do it all by themselves. When they're clear in their thinking, and then they show their competence, they have their skills, they know who to call, or whatever, and they have their courage, the child will watch that, and see that, and begin to develop it, even without going through conscious processing.

Elise: I love that. The IV line between the mother's prefrontal cortex and child's prefrontal cortex.

I have a personal question, which I ask all the guests, which is about mindfulness or building resilience. This is all about living a life well lived. I wondered if you have some advice from your personal journey, and growth, and learnings, and teachings, around what you would say to your 30-year-old self about living a life well lived. What you've learnt.

Linda: The first thing my 60-something-year-old self would say to my 30-year-old self would be, "Oh, sweetheart. This is hard." Offering some understanding and compassion to the confusion that I felt when I was 30. Certainly, seeking and trying to sort it all out, and get the right map, and crack the code. "Who knows what's going on here that could teach me?" Having compassion for how hard it is. That includes how easy it is to fall into the judgement or the criticism of the inner critic.

The biggest piece of advice is love yourself. Love and accept yourself. Love and accept all parts of yourself, and everything that you're doing, all the mistakes you're making. That self-acceptance, self-appreciation, self-love, self-awareness, is really what I try to teach everybody, is what I would try to teach my younger self as well. Just hold yourself with love and tenderness. You'll figure it out. You'll get there.

Elise: Yeah. I feel very moved hearing you say that, because I just think it's really just the piece that is so fundamental to our well-being, and to the well-being of our relationships.

Linda: Carl Rogers said, 50 years ago, "The curious paradox is, the moment I accept myself, then I can change." It's that self-acceptance that opens everything up to be different. We have to learn that over and over again, apparently.

Elise: Thank you so, so much, Linda. I wanted to just open it up now as we finish this conversation, which I've found so valuable, and I have no doubt the listeners have as well, to anything that we haven't touched upon, either around the work that you're doing … As I mentioned, I'll be sharing the links to your work, and your book, and your website. Anything that we haven't covered that you'd like to touch on, or perhaps anything you'd like to leave the listeners with, who are, many of them, perhaps starting this journey of mindfulness meditation.

Linda: Reiterating, maybe from another angle, how important it is to find people who have started figuring this out. I was a psychology intern getting hours towards my license, but looking around and seeing the people who seemed to have it together, and be a little calmer in their lives were all meditators. I began exploring meditation.

We learn from role models. We learn from people who have cracked the code in some way. It's important to do that. To find people who maybe can be mindful, who can be compassionate, who can be loving and caring and empathic, who can be brave and competent and resilient. Finding people who can be the role models for us. Then finding people who can reflect that to us. Finding the true others to our true self. Finding people who see our courage, even if we don't believe in it. Who see our capacities for awareness or generosity, even if we don't believe in it.

There was another quote that I used in my book. Something like, "Our friends are those who remember our song, and sing us it back to us when we've forgotten the words." We need people to reflect to us our own capacities and our own skills so we come to believe in them. That's just another way of saying that resilience, as everything, is learned, and practised, and developed, and polished relating to other people, healthy, resonant people.

Elise: That's such a powerful ending share. I think one of the things that stands out amongst many of the people that I'm interviewing for this program, is that actually, they sought teachers. Those teachers, or mentors, they actually realised that they could reach out and connect with a teacher, or someone of what you're saying, someone who represented that. That changed their entire life trajectory. I think that many people, and I hope for the listeners, that that's a really powerful takeaway. Look for those people, and don't be afraid to actually have the courage to reach out.

Linda: Right. That reaching out, before I knew anything about meditation, my father was dying, and someone gave me a copy of Jack Kornfield's book, *A Path With Heart*. I had never met Jack, I'd never even been to

Spirit Rock, but I read that book every night. That's what got me through a very, very difficult time of my father dying. Yes, we reach out in all kinds of ways to people who have wisdom and compassion that we're seeking, and that we're capable of developing, but we just have to get started.

Elise: Fabulous. Thank you so much, Linda. It's been such a rich and meaningful conversation with you.

Linda: Thank you.

Elise: I am excited for the listeners, actually, who haven't read your book, to actually dive into that and learn so many more practical skills that you teach in this field of resilience. Thank you very much.

Linda: Thank you. Thank you and my pleasure.