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 Shauna Shapiro.

SHAUNA SHAPIRO

***Shauna L. Shapiro**, PhD, is a Professor of Psychology at Santa Clara University and an internationally recognised expert in mindfulness. Dr Shapiro has recently featured at TedX with her talk "The Power of Mindfulness: What You Practice Grows Stronger" and has been featured by many media outlets, such as: Wired magazine, USA Today, Dr. Oz, the Huffington Post, Yoga Journal, and the American Psychologist. You can find out more about her work in her critically acclaimed books The Art and Science of Mindfulness and Mindful Discipline: A loving approach to setting limits and raising an emotionally intelligent child.*

Elise: Welcome, Shauna, I'm so thrilled to have you today on the program. I've been following your work and being the world leader in the space we're really privileged to have you here today. So, thank you so much.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Thank you, I'm excited to be here.

Elise: Shauna, I just wondered if, to begin with, you could give a short background to your work and specifically how you came to mindfulness yourself.

Shauna L. Shapiro: So, it's interesting that recently I have been reflecting on how I was introduced to mindfulness, and when I was about 17 I had spinal fusion surgery. So I had a metal rod put in my spine and it really significantly shifted my life. And at that point my father had introduced me to mindfulness, and I began learning about it really as a way to manage the pain. But it took me a couple of years to really kind of dive into it, and it was a couple of years later that I ended up going to Thailand and Nepal to study and practise and go to a monastery there. And what was interesting is that when I came back from that trip all I wanted to do was practise mindfulness and meditation and my parents said like you're going to need to get a job someday. You might as well go and get your PhD in psychology, because we think you can study mindfulness over there, and no one would really notice too much. It was interesting. So, for me it was a personal love and then professionally. That was a long time ago, that was back in 1997 that I'd start graduate school. So mindfulness wasn't very popular back then.

Elise: Yes, so a crisis led to a complete change of the direction of potentially where your life went.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Absolutely. I talk about that a lot, how crisis means both danger and opportunity. And when things happen to us, so often we react with "it shouldn't be happening, this is wrong, this is unfair, why is life doing this to me?", instead of "this, too, this is part of life," who said life's supposed to go perfectly and who says this isn't perfect" Right? It's

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guiding me in the direction I'm supposed to head. Can I not struggle and resist it so much? I'm still learning that one. I still struggle and resist quite a lot.

Elise: Absolutely. But it's a life-long practice, isn't it?

Shauna L. Shapiro: Absolutely.

Elise: I mean, no matter how long you're doing this, life is always going to throw us these things that we would prefer that weren't in our path. But I guess for me also the practices helped me to kind of relate to these crisis or difficulties in a way that is generative rather than destructive, I suppose.

Shauna L. Shapiro: And also in a way that's compassionate. Where so often, I think, when something goes wrong we kind of look to blame ourselves or others and to have more equanimity and compassion around it and say this is what life is about, it's part of it, it's the sorrow, the ten thousand sorrows and the ten thousand joys.

Elise: Yeah, absolutely. I wondered if you could share your definition of mindfulness.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Mindfulness, as it's been brought into the West, has been, I believe, oversimplified. And I think it's been really important to kind of attempt to make it digestible and accessible for people and a universal practice which it is. But the idea of mindfulness as just about attention or being in the present moment, is limiting. So, the way I define mindfulness is that it has three elements. One of them being attention – just learning how to anchor our awareness here. But also, why we're paying attention – our intention. And then how we pay attention – our attitude are essential. So, I really define it as these three core elements of intentionally paying attention in this kind, open, curious, friendly attitude. And I believe that if the goal of mindfulness – the word mindfulness means to see clearly, to see with discernment - if that's the goal, we have be able to pay attention, but we have to do it with kindness. And if we don't, then sometimes the things we don't want to see, they're just too painful and so when we bring this compassionate attitude, it gives us the courage to look at everything. Even like we talked about the ten thousand sorrows.

Elise: Wonderful. So I heard you speak about that. I think you've called it the IAA model, the Intention, Attention and Attitude. I think it's a lovely way to just keep those three important things in mind. I wonder if you could speak a little bit more about this piece of compassion and how this actually looks when we're in practice.

Shauna L. Shapiro: It's such an important piece of mindfulness, in fact, the more I practiced, the more I realise that mindfulness and compassion are really two sides of the same coin. That mindfulness without compassion isn't mindfulness. Right? It's just this cold, harsh attention. And compassion needs the clarity and precision of mindfulness to really see clearly. Otherwise, compassion can get too mushy and blurry. So, I actually think they're part of the same process. And I really teach that this attitude of compassion is essential for mindfulness. That if I'm just paying attention or, worse, if I'm doing it in a critical judgmental striving way then I'm just growing the neural pathways of judgment and striving and frustration. And so, we want to be carving out, cultivating this attitude of kindness and compassion, of self-compassion and compassion for others. And in a meditation, in bhavana – it's actually the translation and it means 'to cultivate', and so, we're cultivating attention but we also need to being mindful of cultivating our attitude.

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Elise: In your TED talk you shared a story which I loved. I mean, your TED talk was called "What You Practise Grows Stronger". I wonder if you could share that, the bit about your teacher talking about when you were feeling very critical about your mind.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Yes. So, it's interesting as I said I went to Thailand, to this monastery and I didn't have a lot of meditation background, I'd never gone to a retreat and I didn't have a teacher. I kind of gleaned that meditation was about attention and just paying attention. And so I got there and the monks didn't really speak much English and I didn't speak any Thai. And they kind of pointed out to focus on my breath when going out of my nose. And so, I began doing that and I tried so hard but no matter how hard I tried my mind just kept wondering off. And in that way I really got frustrated with myself. I was just "why are you here, you should be doing something else, you're a fake." And then I started getting frustrated with all the monks, why are they just sitting here. Not one of my higher moments. And luckily a monk who spoke English, came from England, and as I was sharing with him my struggles, he looked at me and he said: "Dear, you're not practising mindfulness, you're practising judgement and frustration and striving." And that's when he told me "what you practise, grows stronger". What you practice grows stronger. And we know this now as neuroplasticity. Right? Our repeated experiences shape our brain. So if I'm sitting and I'm meditating and I'm beating myself up and I'm impatient, I'm frustrated, all I'm doing is growing those pathways. If I can sit there and have compassion for the frustration or compassion for my mind wondering off, then what I'm growing is compassion. Completely different pathway. And it doesn't mean that we should block out our feelings of anger, frustration or sadness, what it means is we need to learn how to hold them in kindness and compassion.

Elise: Wonderful. So when we're sitting to practise, it's not just about strengthening these pathways of attention and presence and focus, we're actually practising and getting better at these wonderful attitudes of compassion.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Exactly!

Elise: Can I ask you, you're a mother – and so am I, I'm a little bit behind, you're further along the journey than me – but I wanted to ask you your own personal practise: how this has evolved for you over time and also many of us – many people listening, maybe they're just starting or they're more experienced – this constant struggle of how to make this a really regular integrated practice in our lives? Have you got any tips from your own experience?

Shauna L. Shapiro: From my own struggles is what I'll say. One: the first thing is to have so much compassion for yourself and so much humility. No one really knows how to do this. No one knows how to do this life, no one really knows how to do this whole mothering parenting thing. And for me it has been just one humbling moment after another. And two things I come back to. First is my pure intention. I come back to the dedication I feel to this practice and the love I feel for my son are so trustworthy that whenever I feel like I've messed up, in either sphere, I come back to that purity of heart. And that really supports me. In terms of keeping my practice going while being a mother: what I committed to is that no matter what happened I would sit every day – but it didn't matter how long. And so there's something about just stopping the kind of habitual fast-paced life and sitting my butt down on a cushion and then however long I have I'll sit there's something about making commitment to myself and to my son. I know when he was first born – when he was nursing – I felt that was a really good time to practise meditation. I did a lot of loving kindness practice. Really wonderful. And I also did a lot of Tonglen practice when I'd be up at 4 a.m., and his dad would be sleeping, and I'd be

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there like by myself crying because I was so tired. I would think of all the other moms who were also awake at 4 a.m. nursing. And I would just feel all of our collective exhaustion and then I would send out peace to all of us. And there's this beautiful meditation practice where I felt part of something bigger, I didn't feel so alone.

Elise: That's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. And it's funny, I also spontaneously just shifted my practice from sort of breath to loving kindness when I had my daughter. Thank you.

Shauna L. Shapiro: You're really wise. I did not spontaneously do it. Jack Kornfield who was my mentor for the time - when I got pregnant he said "I think you need to switch your mindfulness practice to loving kindness practice." I don't do that, I'm in it for hard core. My dad is a zen Buddhist. And he's like "no, I really think you should." And so luckily, I trusted him and he was so right, because that is really the practice I needed, and really is actually more of my main practice now.

Elise: Really interesting. Aside from being a mother, you are a writer, a psychologist, you're so many different things. And I wanted to ask you I suppose for the people that are really busy and that are starting meditation through this program: I'm wondering: it looks like this practice where we're just doing nothing, and surely there are many things that we could be doing with our time. I'm speaking as devil's advocate. I wonder if you wouldn't mind speaking to how you actually feel this practice helps you be better at what you're doing or actually be able to manage this very full life that you have.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Well, it's interesting, I think one of the biggest myths or misconceptions about meditation is that I don't have time. So, I want to explain why tI think that's completely inaccurate thinking. First, you don't have to do it for that long. So, even five minutes a day we found significantly impacts people's health – this was a study I did with women with breast cancer. There is a threshold effect at five minutes. So, my sense is everyone has five minutes in their day. Ghandi who was single-handedly fighting the British Empire and saving his country - he set aside every Thursday to be in total silence and meditate. Now, he was busy, right? He actually, literally, legitimately had a busy life. And he still found a full day every week. So, my sense is we all have five minutes. The second thing is, what I find, is it makes me so much more effective. That maybe it costs a little extra time upfront, but then I'm more present with my son so we don't get in a fight. Or I don't re-read the same paragraph ten times because I'm just there. Or I don't forget something at the grocery store and have to cycle back. Like my mind is actually relatively clear. And this is a product of the meditation practice. So what I tell people is maybe it's a little bit like exercise. It takes a little bit time but the payoff is actually well, well worth it.

Elise: Thank you. And how about creativity? You've written two wonderful books and many-many articles – and we'll get to your book, particularly the "Mindful Discipline" in a moment – what's your experience between the relationship of mindfulness, meditation and creativity, if at all?

Shauna L. Shapiro: Yes, thank you for asking that. I have been really interested in creativity and innovation recently. And we just published a study at Stanford University. I'm looking at their PhD engineering students and looking at how mindfulness practice – and if you're more mindful – enhances your innovation and creativity. Because I'm in the bay area of Silicon Valley – lots of tech companies, lots of start-ups, innovation and what we're finding is that meditation significantly increases our ability to problem solve, to think outside the box, to be creative. And I think this is really important for our world. There's a quote, I'm going to mangle

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it, I don't remember who it's by but they said "the only reason I have faith and hope is because of creativity." Because when you look at the world's problems, it's like there's no way to solve all this. And yet, the human mind has such an extraordinary capacity to be creative, I mean, to figure out how to send someone to the moon. That took such an outside-the-box thinking.

Elise: Absolutely.

Shauna L. Shapiro: I think mindfulness and meditation and these practices really support growing that muscle which isn't really supported in our school system.

Elise: And also I think, from my experience it's something about this space that's created, as well. The space that's created. With social media and our mobile phones there's just no space in our days unless we consciously build that in.

Shauna L. Shapiro: It's so true. I really do think that our cell phones are going to be the nicotine of our times, smoking of our time that we don't recognise the impact of. And I think, of course, there's going to be a huge physiological impact from just having the electromagnetic fields near our brains but I think socially and culturally we're not recognising the really detrimental impact it has. There's no space, people don't daydream and be creative, they don't feel anymore, because the moment you have space, you pick up your phone. It's so habitual, it's so addictive. My son and I we've really worked out boundaries for it because what I realised I get so angry at him and yet that's like putting the crack addict next to the crack cocaine and be like "don't touch it". And so, what we do now is when we're in the car, we both lock up our phones. They're locked, literally, away. Because otherwise we've noticed if we put them down, we'll pick it up just automatically. And then during meal times, we have them in the other rooms, so they can't even – they're off, they can't be heard. And I do believe you need to protect yourself from technology. To cover up those gaps where we can be creative, we can be intimate, we can connect. And it's not that technology is bad. I'm very pro technology. And I believe that it makes a really useful servant and a really terrible master.

Elise: Yes, absolutely. I just want to steer us into a question I have for you about when you teach mindfulness, this theme of acceptance or allowing, I find when I teach often what comes up is this confusion around "I don't want to accept this, that feels like I'm resigning to something". So I guess the question is what are we actually bringing acceptance to and how is this different from resignation?

Shauna L. Shapiro: Great question. It's really important, in fact. When I talk about the attitudes of mindfulness, I talk about acceptance and non-judgmentalness. And then I always clarify them because they can be misunderstood. So acceptance, just like you said it is not passive resignation, not at all. Acceptance means we accept things as they are, because they already are this way. Now, it doesn't mean we don't try to change them in the next moment but first we have to accept and acknowledge what is. And usually people step over this part. They see something they don't like and they immediately resist it or struggle against it or fight it. And so acceptance is really not resisting what is, not because you like it but because it's already here. And there's this wonderful quotation by Shinzen Young. He says "suffering equals pain times resistance". So the lack of acceptance, pain times resistance. What he says is pain is part of life. Pain is getting sick, pain is growing old, dying, losing people, it's going to happen to all of us. There's nothing we can do to avoid it. Suffering is optional. And we suffer in direct relationship to how much we resist what's happening. Right? So if I have a headache right now, let's say – I don't, don't worry – but if I do, but I'm really resisting, I'm saying: "No, I can't have a headache right now, I'm trying to do this interview and it's important to

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me, and god why did I forget to drink water this morning, that's my fault", so, I'm really resisting it. Let's say by thousand. So, ten times a thousand, I have ten thousand units of suffering. Now, let's say I have my same ten units of headache but I don't resist it. I just notice this throbbing sensation. This is what's happening, I don't want it to be happening. I still might go and drink some water right, to support it. But I'm not fighting it. So, zero resistance. Ten units of headache. Ten times zero, zero. I have zero suffering. And you see how we do that a lot in life. There is the pain, and then it's our adding to the pain by resisting. And so, the acceptance piece is really being able to see "this is what's happening", to be able to see it clearly. This is what's true. With the non-judgmental piece it's a very similar thing. It's not that we don't see clearly and have discernment. But we don't judge things as bad or good. So, if you take poison, a judgmental view of poison is it's bad, it'll kill you, it's evil. A discerning view of poison is if you take it this way, it will kill you. If you ingest it in this way, it can be used as a vaccination and help you. Just seeing it clearly. No judgment. Does that make sense?

Elise: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for clarifying that. So I guess, to just again use another practical example of any kind of emotion that might come up – and this is also in meditation but also in life – if someone is in an interaction with somebody else, and they get triggered into anger, we don't like to feel anger, we want to usually do something to shift it, so how would acceptance come to this particular moment?

Shauna L. Shapiro: Yes, great question. There is a wonderful book by Thich Nhat Hanh called "Anger". And what he talks about in his book is how anger is like a little baby. Right? And you will be like "oh, shut up", you say "oh, sweetheart, come here", and you kind of accept the anger, you hold it, you say "what do you have to tell me?" Now, what he says – and I really appreciate this – it's not about indulging the anger or acting out of the anger. Because it says once you act, you can never call those words or actions home, and they can cause harm. But also we're not pushing away anger, we're welcoming it "oh, sweetheart, you're really angry right now, well, tell me about this". It's like you're a parent and your child's skinned their knee and you're like "come tell me, I want to hear".

Elise: Wonderful. That just led me into the question I wanted to ask you about your book. Mindful Discipline. A wonderful book for anyone that hasn't come across it yet. First of all I wanted to ask you about what you meant by "discipline" here and also a practical example of either something that you specifically talk about in your book or just anything else that comes to mind around how mindfulness has been helpful or can help us as parents.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Well so first, when we called the book Mindful Discipline we really wanted to kind of take back the word "discipline" because I had such a bad negative connotation of like spanking or really harsh parenting. And discipline actually means to educate. And I think that really our role as parents is educating and supporting. The other reason is that I have been very much an attachment parent which I support but I had gotten a little lost in it and especially during my divorce where my husband was really the disciplinarian and I was like the sweet loving mom. And then when he was no longer there, all of a sudden I had this sweet loving mom with no boundaries. And by the time my son was five or six, he was running the household and he was like a little Napoleon. So I decided to write this book and I really learned about how I could have boundaries that keep the connection and the love and the attachment solid. And so what I loved about what Dr White the paediatrician I wrote the book with, he really helped me understand this idea of loving hierarchies. He said: "so often we think as parents that we should just be equals and like friends with our kids. He's like no, there needs to be a safe person that says "I'm the parent. We go to bed now. I'm the parent. There's no

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candy. I'm the parent. We need to brush our teeth." And so, what he helped me understand is how do we have this loving discipline. Where there is a hierarchy. My prefrontal cortex was formed long before yours, so I'm in a wisdom position. But I respect you and I love you. It's interesting as our children get older, I think there's different ways to meet them. And one of the ways that I've been currently really working with my son – he's twelve now, is much more mature than when I was writing the book. I'm finding ways to give him autonomy so that I'm not always the one dictating. And so, I'll create boundaries like we need to go to bed at this time or we need to wake up at this time. But what we've been doing recently is in the kitchen - he loves to cook and it wasn't working when we were trying to cook together – but what I've decided, once a week, he chooses the menu, I go and get everything, we come home and I'm the sous-chef. So, he dictates everything I do. He'll say "mom, I don't want the onion mixing with the ginger." I think for him to have that sense of control is important to know I respect him, and I'm still going to keep him safe in the other areas of life. So, I think as children get older, finding ways – you know, when he was younger to let him lead on the hike, to say " you're in charge of how fast we go or where we go." I think there's a balance where we find whatever baseline things that we need to really have rules around and then where can we flex and we're going to let our children have autonomy.

Elise: Wonderful. And for personal benefit of myself – with a younger daughter – I'm in a terrible two stage where my daughter's divine but full of fire: so for those of us who have children that are younger that are facing let's say tantrums. Is there anything specific that you would recommend, that would be a mindful approach?

Shauna L. Shapiro: Yes. So much compassion for everyone. For yourself, for your daughter who's having a tantrum. And what I find to be the most important thing here was to keep my centre. That if I got anxious or tried to, oh my god, then he would feed on that. And so for me, the first step was to feel my feet, to take a breath and to tell myself this is going to pass. Like we're still okay. I remember once being at a grocery store and he wanted something, he was in the little seat, pushing something and I said no, and he flipped. And part of it was he was really tired, and I shouldn't have brought him to grocery store. What happens is then you feel a little guilty, and then that creates this negative emotion. But if we could just say "oh, sweetheart, you really wanted that, and not right now," and take a breath, and then everyone's looking at you and they're saying, it's like a bad mom. And just don't add to the suffering, don't add to the pain, it's a painful situation, don't create suffering. I literally would put my hand on my heart to just support myself and took a breath because if I could get myself calm, I know that I could relate to him better.

Elise: Wonderful, thank you. That applies to people that are parents as well. This idea of Shinzen Young like not adding to the suffering. I don't know if you want to say anything more about clarifying this idea of how mindfulness can help us not superimpose a story. Because the story always creates so much suffering.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Mindfulness really helps us kind of unwind from that automatic habit pattern of creating stories. And lets us just rest in this sensation. So if I'm in a grocery store and he's having his temper tantrum, instead of saying "oh my god, I'm a bad mother and I shouldn't have brought him here, everyone's staring, everyone's judging", I'm just noticing heat in my face, tension in my chest, feet on the floor, you know, pain in my heart, maybe tingling in my eyes, and I'm not telling the story of what a bad mom I am and what a horrible child he is, it makes it so much more manageable.

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Elise: So that's coming directly back into the body and consciously shifting your attention?

Shauna L. Shapiro: Yes, coming into the body and then really being disciplined yourself about not telling the story. I mean what I say to people, is our emotions only last for ninety seconds, maximum. They can't continue if we don't feed them with our stories. It's like a car, it won't drive without gasoline. But what we do, is we throw this gasoline, this story of "I'm a bad mom" into the situation, and it explodes. If I can just stay in my body and let these sensations be there, usually it's going to pass and I'm going to be okay. It's like that wasn't fun but it's okay.

Elise: So, on this note of stories, the stories we tell, I wonder if you could speak to what people can do, if, for example, when they're in meditation and then might have thoughts that keep coming up and they're actually stuck in some kind of story. Maybe they're worried about something and it's like the recurring story, recurring thought. What advice about practically managing that? Or what do you do in that situation when you're in practice or out of practice?

Shauna L. Shapiro: It happens to all of us. First of all is just to normalise it. And there's a couple of different options, I mean, what I love about contemplative practices - mindfulness and compassion practice, and there's hundreds - is there's different pathways. And so what you're going to do is you going to kind of be a scientist and go in there and say "what's helpful?"So, one thing to do when your mind keeps getting called to stories is just go back to the body and the breath and have a strong anchor there. That's what I start with. But then if the story keeps coming, what I'll do is I'll notice that it's creating pain, usually, it's usually a painful tape of….for me, after my divorce "I'm always going to be alone," and "no one's ever going to love me" and recurrent thoughts. So, then, to actually put my hand on my heart and have compassion for myself and say "ouch, this story really hearts", to not try to get rid of it but to be like this is hurting and this is like reaching out for hot coal, it's going to burn you. And so to move into compassion practice with the story. So, the first step is more about aware of the thought, let it go, come back to the breath to the body, the second pathway would be to notice the pain of the story and to give yourself compassion. Right in that moment. Not to get rid of the story but because you're hurting. And I think those are the two basic steps that I would work with for six months before coming back for some more.

Elise: If there are recurring stories and if it's coming from – I don't know – a trauma or something, when would someone know that they should go on and explore this outside of meditation.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Okay, so I think it's wonderful to have a teacher or a therapist or a coach when you're learning how to meditate and throughout because there are individual places where we get stuck, and it's really important to have support, to have a different vision, to have a different perspective, and so I really see psychotherapy as not kind of waiting till something's wrong, but as a way to support and refine and educate. I've been so grateful for my therapist, my teachers, my mentors, because we all have blind spots, and so I encourage people not to wait until they're stuck but to go and seek someone, a wise loving presence who can really support them, because it takes a lot of courage to look deeply at yourself and to look deeply at life. You know, we all have these incredibly tender hearts. And so, to get support when we kind of go in there and to have someone holding our hand a little bit.

Elise: Wonderful. I think that's a really great place to finish. I just wanted to offer you a couple of more minutes if there was anything that we haven't covered or that you would like to leave

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listeners with - whether it's the biggest thing you've learned that's helped you on the way – whatever, anything that comes to mind.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Thank you. I think, for me the most important thing – and I most hope people will take away with them – is this idea that transformation is always possible, that we can always change, that we can always begin again. It's never too late. And I think for me a lot of times – you know, I mess up, I yell at my son or I'll do something that I'm not proud of - and there's a choice plane. I can either go down the shame hole or I can hold myself in compassion and with clarity and say "I'm going to choose to begin again." And in every moment there's infinite possibility. Like we're never stuck. And I think if people truly believed that, they would have more hope and they would have faith, you know. That's why neuroplasticity is such a wonderful message. It says we can change in every moment. It's never too late.

Elise: Wonderful. Thank you so, so much and I'll be sharing the links to your work and your books and the listeners can explore more deeply.

Shauna L. Shapiro: Wonderful. Thank you so much.

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