



## Conscious Life presents

### Healthy Minds and Well-Being

Guest - Stephanie Wagner

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#### **[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today, I'm speaking with Stephanie Wagner, a board-certified health and wellness coach with a passion for mindfulness and meditation and extensive experience in professional development.

She's the Director of Learning and Development at Healthy Minds Innovations, where she helps people cultivate habits to achieve greater well-being. She's especially skilled in topics related to workplace well-being. Stephanie Wagner, thank you so much for being with us today.

#### **Stephanie Wagner**

Thank you so much. I'm delighted to be here.

#### **Meagen Gibson**

I'd love it if you could start by walking us through the Healthy Minds framework of well-being and how it emphasizes trainable skills to enhance our well-being despite external challenges and adversity.

#### **Stephanie Wagner**

The Healthy Minds framework of well-being is a unique scientific framework of well-being that basically has looked at a convergence of different themes in areas like Asian meditative traditions, world's wisdom traditions, philosophy, psychology. We're looking at all these different themes.

And what we've come up with is this framework of skills that actually can be trained. And these skills are linked to being beneficial to well-being. So these four pillars of the framework of a healthy mind are awareness, connection, insight, and purpose.

And so this is really predicated on this foundation that well-being is a skill that can be learned. So as you mentioned, even in the way that you frame the question, we oftentimes think that our well-being is contingent on our external circumstances.

**[00:01:50]**

When things are going well, our relationships are harmonious. When work is going smoothly, we experience well-being. And when times are tough, when we have conflict, when we might be dealing with other stressors in our lives, we experience low levels of well-being.

So what this is suggesting, actually, and what the science is suggesting is that well-being is a skill that can be learned and that we can actually experience well-being in spite of whatever our external circumstances are. It's a source of well-being that exists no matter what's going on. So it's a pretty amazing premise.

**Meagen Gibson**

That is a fantastic and amazing premise. And also that it's skill-based because it's... I can viscerally remember when I was really struggling with my mental health, what was so frustrating for me was not only how I felt, but also that my life was objectively great. But I could not access the feeling of it.

That's what you're describing is this obstruction to my well-being. From the converse, now that my mental health... I've been working on it for several years, I talk to wonderful experts every day. When I'm not well, my well-being is still great because I have access to the ability to understand and be grateful. People think like, "Well, just be grateful or just find a purpose." And you're like, "I have one. I just can't connect to it."

**Stephanie Wagner**

I mean, that's essentially what we're learning to do then through training our mind in these skills is we're learning how to connect with a sense of appreciation. We're learning how to connect with our purpose and meaning. These things are available to us at every moment. But as you said, when we're struggling, it's hard to access. So we very systematically learn how to train ourselves to connect with these qualities and these skills step-by-step along the way.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I love that context of training, too, because I always talk about... I've been working with a physical trainer for about a year now, and we always joke. I'm like, "Can't learn this in a book, can you?" I can read about physical training, and I can watch TikToks about physical training, but neither of those things grow my muscles. I have to actually practice. I have to actually do the work. I have to go through the motions and fight resistance, literally, gravitationally.

So I love this framework of practices and skills. Tell me a little bit more about the science of why these things have to be practices and skills that we learn, and also why we do it when we don't need it instead of when we necessarily do need it.

**Stephanie Wagner**

Yeah, exactly. There's this scientific principle that really underlies this idea of training ourselves in well-being, which is neuroplasticity. This is something maybe that many of the people watching have heard of before.

And so neuroplasticity essentially is our brain's capacity to change. And in fact, our brains are changing all of the time, but it's usually the forces around us that are driving these changes, and it's not intentional, and it's not always positive.

**[00:04:57]**

So one of the things that I think about that drives a lot of change is every time that we unconsciously and habitually pick up our cell phone, and we're doing this again and again, what is that training us to do? That's actually training more and more distraction, right?

So what we're doing here is we're harnessing the capacity for our brains to change, but we're doing it with intention, and we're directing it to these positive things that help to support our ability to bounce back from adversity, so this is resilience, and also helping us to develop this ability to flourish, so even to rise to the top of our game when things are going well.

So neuroplasticity really underlies a lot of what we're doing here. And then I think I will answer your question about doing it in advance when times are tough. I think when times are tough, we just don't have the internal space or capacity to even do anything.

We're often in this state of hyperarousal. We're often just trying to survive. Many times, we just don't even have the time to deal with things. I even just think about when I was caring for my father, when he was in the dying process, and I was so thankful that I had been meditating for years and years because it really set me up for the foundation to be able to be with him in the depths of his suffering, also to be with my own grief as I was watching him decline.

And so we actually just use our ability and the time and the space and being in a good place so that we're training for the marathon. I love the metaphor of either training for a marathon or training to play a piano concert in Carnegie Hall. You wouldn't just step out there and do it. You do all of the work in advance to rise to the occasion.

So similarly, we can think about just training our minds step-by-step along the way really sets us up to be able to encounter or ride the waves of the difficulties in a way where rather than them overwhelming us, we can actually be with it with a little bit of ease, with a little bit of well-being.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Some of these skills that science has documented several times over are super-helpful. Science-backed things that we know help can be really, really difficult skills to learn for people with anxiety, such as meditation.

I know people are sick of hearing about it at this point, but I'm always like, "I hated meditation until I dealt with my anxiety." I was like, "Oh, not the place I want to be. You want me to just sit with my quiet mind? I don't think so. That's not a safe place for me to be." So why might meditation not be the right thing to do when we're trying to change our relationship to anxiety?

### **Stephanie Wagner**

Well, interesting. I think just from my own experience, because I actually came to the practice of meditation because I was a deeply anxious person, and not to say that it was easy to deal with my anxiety. But I think that we have a lot of expectations around what meditation will do for us as it relates to our anxiety.

So we're often so desperate because of the physical discomfort and the negative rumination and the negative thought loop that circles through our mind that we're really just looking for some immediate ease. And we sit down and we think that meditation is going to get rid of our thoughts.

**[00:08:37]**

And then all of a sudden, we're faced with our monkey mind, which is just doing all of its monkey mind shenanigans, all of the thoughts, and the worries, and the fears, and the whatever. We're faced with that. But what actually happens in the whole process is that without training our minds in meditation, we're not aware of what our minds are doing, and we become very fused with the experience.

So it's not like we have anxiety, it's like we become anxiety. It's almost like anxiety feels like this big immovable piece of rock that just overwhelms everything. There's no space in our experience because we're so reactive.

So with meditation, what we learn to do is we learn to develop a different relationship with anxiety through a bunch of different techniques. But the transformation is different than I think we think it's going to be because we actually don't get rid of our thoughts. In fact, we learn how to see our thoughts as thoughts rather than having them be so overwhelming.

Another metaphor that I really like here is without awareness of what's going on, anxiety is like we're being thrown into a raging river and we're splashing about and we're really struggling, we're drowning. But with meditation, what we learn how to do is we actually learn how to step out of the river and be able to see it happening so that we're not so fused with it.

We can see the thoughts as thoughts. They don't define who we are. We see the sensations as sensations. They don't define our well-being. And so through all of that, learning how to see these things more clearly, it really shifts our experience of anxiety.

So I think it's not so much that meditation isn't the right thing to do initially, but I do think it's more about normalizing our expectations and also making sure that we're doing the right things to work with where we are on the anxiety journey, because sometimes sitting with our anxiety is not the right thing to do, and sometimes it is.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Okay, so how do practices like mindfulness, attention training, self-awareness contribute to the emotional regulation that can get us to the point where we not only have the right expectations, but we are arriving at that place on the shore of the river of our emotions, thoughts, and feelings? As you said.

### **Stephanie Wagner**

We all have this capacity to be aware. And this capacity to be aware, I would just call the sense of presence, the knowing quality of our mind. It's like when we are with what's happening, we know what's happening. And so mindfulness is a really important skill that we train in the Healthy Minds program that helps us learn to remember to be present, to remember to be aware.

We notice when we're distracted, and then we come back to be with whatever is happening in the moment. Attention, though, you can think about as being the flashlight of the mind that allows us to intentionally direct what we're attending to.

**[00:11:58]**

So let's just use the example of maybe a very overwhelming situation that we're having at work. So let's say we have to give a big presentation and we're overcome with anxiety, and then it churns and churns and churns in our mind.

Mindfulness helps us see that we're churning, and we can see that we're getting activated. And then attention helps us to decide what we are going to attend to. In some cases, when the anxiety feels too overwhelming, which in some cases it does, you can actually bring your attention to something more neutral.

These neutral things can actually help us get out of the loop of the anxiety. So it might just be something as simple as bringing awareness to the feeling of your feet on the floor, or the feeling of your back being supported by the chair, or even bringing your attention to sounds in the environment. All of these are neutral things that get you out of the anxiety.

However, as you're learning how to work with your anxiety, we can actually begin to work with anxiety itself by bringing our attention to the anxiety. Now, I know for people who are deeply anxious and habitually anxious, that sounds like a terrifying prospect. But honestly, it's something that we can learn how to do through time.

What we do is we bring our attention to the sensations on our body, and we begin to see the sensations associated with the anxiety. We look for the sensations. We might see that heightened heart rate or that feeling of shallow breathing or the feeling of tenseness. We also see the thoughts in the mind. But what's helpful about this is that we have this... When we're anxious, we have this feeling of anxiety as one thing.

But when we actually turn towards it and we get curious about it, we can see, oh, my gosh, actually, anxiety isn't just one thing. It's made up of many different pieces. There are sensations in our body. The sensations are moving, the thoughts are changing.

It's almost like shaving foam in a way. So like shaving foam, if you were to look at shaving foam and not know that it's shaving foam, you'd be like, oh, that looks solid, right? But then you start poking at it and it's made up of bubbles and it starts to dissipate.

Similarly, with awareness, mindful awareness, and with attention, we actually turn towards the anxiety and we see, oh, it actually isn't this big, solid, unchanging thing. It's this very dynamic experience that's made up of a lot of pieces that are constantly changing and moving.

I think mindfulness and attention really help us to determine, does this feel workable? What am I going to attend to? Can I bring awareness to it? Or do I need to work with something more neutral? And then self-awareness is really just this capacity to be aware of whatever is going on in our internal state.

It's the capacity to bring awareness to our thoughts and our emotions. However, the challenge is, of course, this is much easier said than done, right? So the challenge is that we're so distracted. And especially when we are experiencing a strong, afflictive emotion like anxiety that's so painful, it's really hard to see things clearly.

**[00:15:16]**

It's like the thoughts just become so overwhelming, there's no perspective, and the anxiety itself just becomes so overwhelming. So we can just begin to learn how to recognize when anxious thoughts start creeping in, when the sensations start arising, we start getting anxious, and then we can make some decisions on how we relate to it.

Self-regulation just basically means that we can go into our toolbox and decide what's the right thing to do at this moment. So I'll just use an example for me. I was actually going to be leading a guided meditation for a big organization, and I never get nervous, hardly ever get nervous. But I was super-nervous because it felt like a high stakes thing for me, professionally. And so I was so anxious. I was overwhelmed with anxiety, and I could see it happening.

And I'm like, "You know what? I'm actually just going to go for a walk." Because the thing about anxiety is that there's a ton of energy behind it. I didn't feel like I could sit with it at that moment, but I did. I went for a walk. I went for a mindful walk.

And when I came back, I just sat down. I led the meditation. I was in a really grounded space. Just being able to actually do what I felt my body needed in that moment to work with the anxiety was exactly what I needed. The self-awareness just allows us to catch those cues more quickly when those anxious thoughts and those anxious sensations start arising in our body and our mind.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It's so interesting that you give that example, too, and the mindfulness versus attention versus self-awareness, because as I'm sure you know, and as people will learn as they start this, it's like you're learning the skills to give yourself the capacity to find curiosity, to find the inch of space to be like, "What is this trying to tell me?"

But we label all discomfort as anxiety sometimes. Some people that are more oriented toward depression might label it as depression, but we're talking about just different expressions of the nervous system, if you will. We label everything as anxiety, and then it's not at all.

Once you get that tiny, tiny bit of capacity, you're like, "Oh, I feel disrespected, or that reminds me of something from my history." Because there's so many different reasons behind what we all label as anxiety, those interventions that you're talking about, those actions, even if they are inaction. They're journaling, sitting still, but they're still taking action, or it's a heavy blanket, or it's a shower, or it's a walk.

I remember a time I got super, super activated and anxious a couple of years ago, and my husband and my kids are aware of my little tools that I will go to just from observing me, telling them, "It's not your fault. I've got something going on. I need to work through", and watch me intervene.

And so they were offering me all these things. "Do you want this, this, this?" And I was like, "No." And I went and I got a bathing suit on and I swam laps for an hour. And they were like, "Well, that was unexpected." And I was like, "You're telling me? I had no idea."

### **Stephanie Wagner**

That's amazing. And that just self-awareness helps you also just tune into what's the right thing that I need to do right now. But I think you point to something really important, which is curiosity.

**[00:18:35]**

So there are all of these different skills and pillars of well-being in the Healthy Minds framework. I'm just introducing you to one set of skills, which is through the Pillar of Awareness. But honestly, the Pillar of Insight is all about curiosity and being able to see the role of our beliefs and our assumptions and our expectations and seeing the mental time travel that happens with anxiety.

We're either retroactively playing something over and over again in our mind or that we're the fortune teller that is never telling us good news about the future is taking root. Curiosity is also a really important thing, as is compassion, having self-compassion, that anxiety is really painful and hard. So lots of different ways to be able to work with anxiety through the skills in the Healthy Minds framework.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I don't want to give people the impression that curiosity is the key, because even though it I remember viscerally how far away I felt from the ability to be curious about my anxiety. It was the last thing I wanted to be curious about, because it's just so uncomfortable. So if you don't feel like you have the capacity for curiosity right now, I understand. And that's the point is that we take different interactions and different interventions and different skills to create the space that might allow for that space for curiosity to arise.

### **Stephanie Wagner**

Definitely. And I I think back to a story when I was on a meditation retreat with my meditation teacher, and I had been practicing for a number of years, and I still was just really, really anxious. And I felt like my practice wasn't really helping the way that I thought it was going to. And again, it goes back to those expectations that I had that I was going to have a calm, peaceful mind and a good meditative experience.

And if we had the ability to encounter that in a moment, the whole world would actually be meditators, right? Everybody would be meditating if that were the case. But my teacher's encouragement was really like, just keep practicing because it really is a long game.

Of course, we do... The science points that there are benefits from practicing in as little as five minutes a day, but really the sustained change for me, came with a lot of consistency and looking back over the years. So I can see now, now that I've been meditating for over 20 years, I look back at the Stephanie that came to meditation because I was so deeply anxious. And I see I am a transformed person.

I don't experience anxiety as my chronic state of being like I did before. It's what I would call normal situational anxiety, which is healthy. It helps us do a good job. It helps us show that we care about pursuits in our lives and people and relationships in our lives. Anxiety is actually coming from a lot of care. So I think just seeing the long game of the practice, too, has been really helpful for me.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. It's enticing because it can be so darn useful and is so socially rewarded, the benefits of it anyway, and organization and getting things done and having endless energy sometimes, if necessary, being able to channel it. It can be very useful. But there's a law of diminishing returns on that usefulness, isn't there?

**[00:21:48] Stephanie Wagner**

Yeah, definitely.

**Meagen Gibson**

And do you find also that the biggest change, because you talked about "20 years ago Stephanie", and now, that it's not necessarily the circumstances of your life, even though I'm sure that those have ebbed and flowed and changed, but it's more the atmosphere within that feels so much different than it is circumstantial about what your life looks like.

**Stephanie Wagner**

Definitely. I think there have been a lot of circumstances that have changed, of course, and that's just the nature of being human. But certainly in those 20 years, there's been a lot of difficulties, too. I think what I've just noticed for myself, again...

To go back to what I was talking about at the beginning, is that this idea that there is this source of well-being that exists within us in spite of what's happening outside of us, I am able to come back to this place of... I don't want to call it inner calm, because it's not always calm, but it's this sense of warmth, care, being with, presence.

I just want to actually point to a research article that was published several years ago that basically has this statistic that we're distracted 47% of our waking lives. And so, yes, that probably seems low, actually, compared to most of us. We probably think that we're more distracted than 47% of our waking lives.

But the more important thing for me in that study was that being distracted was associated with lower levels of well-being. So when we're more present with who we're with, with what we're doing, we're able to connect with a source, a sense of well-being in spite of whatever we're going through. So I think to your point, yes, it's about cultivating and nurturing that inner well-being that regardless of what's going on in the outer circumstances, is available to us 24/7.

**Meagen Gibson**

And what is your... I feel like this is not me trying to stump you, but...

**Stephanie Wagner**

You could...

**Meagen Gibson**

What in your experience is the relationship between focus and distraction? Are they opposites of each other, technically speaking?

**Stephanie Wagner**

Focus and distraction.

**Meagen Gibson**

If you're not in a state of distraction, does that inherently mean you're focused? And where I'm going is, does focus imply and help that sense of purpose? Small questions.



**[00:24:27] Stephanie Wagner**

I think this is where we could really get into the weeds about defining what things mean. So I guess the way that I think about focus is attending to one thing. Focus meaning I am actually doing a task and I'm with the task and I'm able to be with the task and I'm able to just not pick up my phone or notice when I want to pick up my phone and just continue to do the thing.

So what I would say, though, is that awareness, which is this knowing quality of our mind, this capacity to be present, can be present regardless of whether we're focused or not. Awareness allows us to be with whatever is happening and to see whatever is happening. If our minds are chaotic, it helps us to be like, "Oh, my gosh, my mind's all over the place right now."

Or if your mind is calm and peaceful and you're experiencing appreciation, you can be with that. So I guess that's just the way I personally think about the distinction. I don't know if that resonates with you or not, but I do think awareness just helps us see whatever is happening in the moment. It could be total chaos. Or not.

But focus is really more of that capacity to stay on task, and there are incredible benefits to staying on task. I think to relate it to purpose, I mean, purpose is this underlying sense of meaning that actually is with us underlying every single activity, the fact that you're doing this work and supporting this conference, there's some underlying meaning for you that's there.

The fact that I continue to teach meditation and that I left my corporate job to teach meditation, there's underlying meaning there. So there's an underlying meaning. We just have to learn how to connect with it and see it. And so being aware helps us connect with it and see it. Being distracted does not help us connect with it and see it. So I would say that this capacity to be present in this capacity to be aware helps us connect with and see the meaning that's underlying everything that we do.

**Meagen Gibson**

That was a great answer. Well done.

**Stephanie Wagner**

I had to go back in the recesses of my mind. I'm like, "What is the difference between..."

**Meagen Gibson**

"Thanks a lot, Meagen." I swear I'm not trying to trap you. I'm just thinking things. And I was like, "I'm just going to let the inner thoughts go out."

**Stephanie Wagner**

Totally.

**Meagen Gibson**

So for somebody at home who's watching us and they're struggling and know they have anxiety and they're new to things like meditation and mindfulness, where and how should they start and how can they do that today?

**[00:27:02] Stephanie Wagner**

Well, I think if you're interested in meditation, one of the things that can be challenging is even just knowing how to do it. Finding a source of learning how to meditate. Of course, I am very partial to the Healthy Minds program app. We have a free meditation app that is downloadable at your app store. There's no paywalls, there's no nothing.

We're a non-profit, and we have made our commitment to making this freely available so that as many people as possible can benefit from training and the skills of well-being. I think the thing that I like about the Healthy Minds program that's really different from other meditation apps is that it is a structured program that contains both podcast-style lessons where you learn about well-being and the science behind it.

Then you also then go through these practices, and then the practices actually can be done either seated or active. When we're anxious, it can often feel really painful to try and sit still. These active practices are intended to be done while we're doing some light repetitive activity like walking, like house cleaning, like vacuuming, whatever it is. Then you just plug in your headphones and then you do the practice.

You can choose the length of your practice. If you're new, you probably want to start with five minutes. It's probably going to be harder to do longer than that, even though we might have this very romanticized idea of how long we want to do it. Start with five minutes.

Go through the app, go through the program, and just see if you can get a sense of what it's like to practice for five minutes a day. Now, the Healthy Minds program isn't the only way to learn meditation. There are lots of other resources out there, lots of apps, meditation communities, that thing that can be really helpful. But find a support that will help you learn how to practice and see how it goes. Yeah, that's what I would say.

**Meagen Gibson**

I love that.

**Stephanie Wagner**

Start small, get some support. I'm a fan of the app. The app has science behind the fact that you can actually experience a reduction in anxiety symptoms from practicing for five minutes a day. So the science points to the fact that it's just a little short, consistent practice.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, the science does not lie. I assure you. We stack little tiny moments of self-trust with ourselves when we do it, too. Two minutes, three minutes, four minutes, five minutes building. Yeah, establishing that pattern of trust with ourselves, huh?

**Stephanie Wagner**

Yeah, definitely.

**Meagen Gibson**

Well, Stephanie, you've told us about Healthy Minds. How can people find out more about you and your work?

**[00:29:30] Stephanie Wagner**

Great. Well, thank you. I do meditation coaching. I do it through the Healthy Minds program. If they're Healthy Minds app users that want support in their practice and understand how to apply the skills into their daily lives, I love working with folks on that. They can log on to [hminnovations.org](http://hminnovations.org). I also teach for a meditation community called the Tergar Meditation Community. So [tergar.org](http://tergar.org), T-E-R-G-A-R.

Then you can also log on to my website, [innerfirehealthcoach.com](http://innerfirehealthcoach.com). I'm on all the socials, Stephanie Wagner, Meditation Coach on Instagram and Facebook. I'm also on LinkedIn. So yeah, lots of ways to connect.

**Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. Stephanie, thank you so much for being with us today.

**Stephanie Wagner**

Great. Thank you so much. Pleasure to chat with you.