



How Kindness Supports Healing Toxic Relationships

Guest: Sharon Salzberg

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone, to this interview where I'm talking with Sharon Salzberg about how kindness can help heal toxic relationships and also bring deeper intimacy and connection.

To give you a little bit of Sharon's background, Sharon Salzberg is a meditation pioneer, world renowned teacher, and New York Times best-selling author. She's one of the first to bring mindfulness and loving kindness meditation to mainstream American culture over 45 years ago, inspiring generations of meditation teachers and wellness influencers.

Sharon is-co founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts and is the author of twelve books, including the New York Times best-seller *Real Happiness* now in its second edition, and her seminal work, some of which we'll draw upon in this interview, *Lovingkindness*. Her forthcoming book, *Real Life: The Journey from Isolation to Openness and Freedom* was released in April, and her podcast, *The Metta Hour*, has amassed 6 million downloads and features interviews with thought leaders from the mindfulness movement and beyond.

So, welcome, Sharon. I am super excited to have some time with you. Thank you so much for joining me for this interview.

Sharon Salzberg

It's a great delight to be with you.

Alex Howard

So I want to start with a question which on one hand may seem very obvious, but I actually think it's a really important contextual piece before we go on this journey together. When you speak of kindness, what is kindness? What does that mean to you?

Sharon Salzberg

I think of kindness as compassion in action. So it's not necessarily like a feeling state only at all, but it's some manifestation of a sense of connection. Doesn't have to be highly emotional or certainly doesn't have to be dramatic in any way, but it is that kind of living expression of compassion and connection.

[00:02:29] Alex Howard

I guess, intrinsic in what you're saying, and I'm sure we'll come to this later in our discussion, but kindness isn't always, in a sense there can be a disconnect from how we feel and how we act, from what you're saying, that we may not feel kindness in our heart, but we may act kindly in our behaviors.

Sharon Salzberg

Or the other way around is more what I was thinking probably, that we can have kindness in our hearts and real caring for the well-being of the other, let's say, or others. But the particular action may not suit maybe conventional notions of yes, I'm going to give them money, or yes, I'm going to let them move back in, or something like that. A lot of that is situational, it's contextual. What we do is another question, it's a very complex question.

But, why we do things? Do we hold back out of dismissal of somebody else or not noticing that they're struggling in some way? Or do we hold back because they're different than we are? Or because we think I could never do enough. Whatever I do could never ever really resolve this situation. Or maybe we don't hold back, maybe we do the good that's appearing in front of us, even if it seems kind of small in some ways, that's what I would call kindness, is that doing.

Alex Howard

So I'm curious as to some of your journey to kindness being a central theme within your body of work. So how did that happen?

Sharon Salzberg

That's a very interesting question. I went to India when I was 18 years old. I was a university student, and I went through the university as a kind of independent study project that I created because I wanted to learn how to meditate. So this was quite some years ago, and meditation was not that popular. And I was going to school, I took an Asian philosophy course. I was very struck by, I would almost call it, a sense of belonging or inclusion in talking, say, about the Buddha's perspective on life, where the Buddha talked so much about suffering being a part of life.

In my mind, rather than that feeling depressing and overwhelming and kind of a bummer, you know, that was a statement of welcome, because I'd had, like many people do, a very traumatic, difficult childhood. And like, for many people, my family was one where this was never, ever spoken about. And so I didn't know what to do with all those feelings inside of me. And then here's the Buddha saying right out loud, there's suffering in life. And for me, that felt like him saying, you belong. You're not so weird, you're not so very different.

This is a part of life. And that was kind of the biggest expression of kindness maybe I'd ever had in my life. That acknowledgment, yeah, you belong. You're a part of life. And it was based on that. I also heard in that class there were methods, there were practices, that people could do called meditation, and if you did them, you could potentially be a lot happier. So I was going to college in this town, Buffalo, New York. And I looked all around Buffalo, and did not see it anywhere. So I created this independent study project and went off.

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And I would say that even though my earliest practices for years were really based on mindfulness and wisdom, which were really important for me, I always had that kernel of what it felt like to receive that acknowledgment. Yeah, you belong, you're okay. You can be a part of things. You're a part of life. And so when I heard about other meditations that were really centering on the deepening of qualities like lovingkindness and compassion, I just gravitated right toward them.

Alex Howard

I think one of the places, and you touched on it briefly earlier, one of the places that it's most difficult to be kind is in relationship with ourselves. And maybe you could say a little bit about what it even means that we're in relationship with ourselves and why how we meet ourselves is so important, really, for everything else in our lives.

Sharon Salzberg

Well, there are people, and we all probably know several of them, who can be much kinder to others than they tend to be toward themselves. And it's not an uncommon pattern. And I think what happens in the end is that things get so unbalanced and there's such difficulty receiving as compared to giving that people crash and burn. And that's part of where burnout often comes from, not from a lack of caring. People have tremendous caring for the people or the beings they are taking care of, but in the end they lose resilience or they lose a sense of inner resource.

They're depleted, exhausted, overcome and cannot continue to really care and try to make a difference. And so it's really an essential thing, I find, to learn and I don't mean to perfection, that you have to love yourself totally to then embark on a life of caring for others. I don't mean that at all. But there has to be some kind of balance and some movement toward receiving as well. And it's very hard for a lot of us. And a part of it is the myth I think that many of us grew up with that the correct way to have ambition or try to make a difference or learn something new or make progress in something is a really harsh, punitive environment, whether you're creating that for employees that you manage or internally towards yourself.

And I think studies really show that in fact performance does spike in that kind of environment, but briefly and then we crash. And that the best way, in fact the most effective way, to make a difference, to learn something new, to make progress, to change a habit, is a kind of self-compassion and it's mystifying to us. I think that's a big hurdle. A lot of people think of kindness toward oneself or self-compassion as a kind of laziness and you're going to lose all standards of excellence and you're just going to like, it's okay, what the hell, doesn't matter.

But I don't think any of that happens. But we have kind of the creation of a whole different environment from within so that we can see our mistakes, learn from them, maybe make amends, whatever it might be, but then move on, rather than have this kind of wholesale condemnation of ourselves, I'm so bad, I'm so terrible, I can never learn, things are stuck, which is going to lead nowhere.

Alex Howard

Yeah. Another one of those belief systems, particularly where I live and where I grew up in the UK, is that being kind of self-inflating yourself or being kind to yourself or thinking that you're great is

arrogant or narcissistic or whatever it may be. And so there's almost a kind of bonding that happens with others through being self-deprecating and it can be quite difficult for people to actually even open to the idea of seeing themselves in a softer kind of way.

[00:09:54] Sharon Salzberg

Yeah, I think actually opening to the ideas maybe for a lot of people it's the biggest hurdle. Once you're there, then it's practice because of course we're not used to it and it takes time but nonetheless, even believing that it's worth it, it's a leap for a lot of people.

Alex Howard

It also, going back to what you said a little bit earlier about there's the thought element and there's the feeling element, that one of the things that often happens in trauma is that there's an emotional shutdown that happens and that we go more into our sort of hyper-rational mind as a way of finding safety. And so what I think often can happen is there's also a defending and a closing of one's heart as part of that trauma response. And I'm curious as to how you see that impacting on one's capacity towards that more feeling element of kindness.

Sharon Salzberg

Well I think sometimes if you're talking about kindness toward oneself, I think some part of the progress toward that is often a kind of grieving. There's a tremendous well up of sorrow that this has not been a part of one's life or one's upbringing perhaps or mistakes made, whatever it might be, but it's not that we end there. That's a part of the process. But someone once defined trauma for me as being frozen. So if we're frozen, we're actually not allowing, as you say, we're not allowing ourselves to feel at all.

And so being aware through a process of some challenge and difficulty, not feeling so alone sometimes in that process is very important. And realizing it's not the end. It's a part of a journey. And so we can allow ourselves to go through it. And even there, one of the exercises I sometimes encourage people to do is when you see your own fear, when you see your own guilt, when you see your own anger, rather than calling those states bad or wrong or terrible or weak, try reframing them as states of suffering and see what happens.

And that's actually a very important thing because we can be so harsh with ourselves and speak to ourselves the way we would never speak to a friend or even a stranger. And to realize that and to realize it's just not onward leading, that tendency, it's going to leave us stuck. Then we can begin to just sort of challenge, in an easy way and even a kind of adventurous way, all those habits.

Alex Howard

Yeah, it's interesting. It strikes me that it's not just how we speak to ourselves or other people, it's also how we respond. Someone that we care for becomes emotionally upset about something and most of us would soften in our hearts and want to sort of hold and support them. When we feel emotionally tender about something, we completely shame ourselves and shut ourselves down. And it seems that that is that harshness and that defensiveness.

[00:13:10] Sharon Salzberg

Yeah. And I think there is a belief system embedded in there that we think this is the correct way to grow or to change or to be with ourselves or whatever it is that we might believe and so that deserves a big challenge. What assumption are we making there? And does it hold up? And that's one of the things I've always loved about the process of meditation. It's not something people necessarily associate with meditation, but it's really a part of it. It's like you get to look at all those things you have held to be true and question them.

Is it true that endless vengefulness is really strong? Is it? Spending 20 hours a day thinking about the actions of someone else, obsessed over something you can't ever control or even change? Is that really strong? Is compassion or kindness really that stupid? Because that's also a big myth, that it's sentimental, it's kind of gooey, and you lose strength, you lose clarity, you lose purpose. Is that so? Let's take a look. What's my experience directly as I see that? Am I really as alone as I sometimes feel? Really? Is that true? And we get to see it all for ourselves.

Alex Howard

Yeah. It also strikes me that when we practice meditation, if we're not being kind towards ourselves, it's a pretty unpleasant place to sit and to be. That relationship also defines part of our experience, of our practice.

Sharon Salzberg

Yeah. And we see it, it becomes pretty obvious. It's another exercise that I like to do. Let's say, there's so many kinds of meditation, it may not even be a meditation, it may be some other process of introspection that you're engaged in. But let's say it's meditation and that the particular method you're using is something like placing your attention on the feeling of the breath, the sensations of the in and out breath, which was actually the very first meditation I ever learned.

I'd gone to India through this school program, wandered around for a few months because I wanted something very practical, I wasn't interested in philosophy or comparative religion or anything, I wanted to learn, how do you do this stuff? So I finally found that, and that was January 1971 that I began. And the first instruction I ever got was, sit down and feel your breath. Just sit and feel the natural movement of the in and out breath. And my first response was, that's so stupid. I came all the way to India. Where's the magical esoteric...

Alex Howard

I could have done that in America.

Sharon Salzberg

I could have stayed in Buffalo and felt my breath, like, what's this about? And then I thought, how hard can this be? What'll it be, like, 800 breaths, 900 breaths, before my mind starts to wander? And to my absolute shock, it was like one breath or half a breath, and I was devastated. And when my mind would wander, I wouldn't practice what I was told to practice, which was gently let go and come back to the breath. It would be this long rant. You're so terrible. You're so bad. No one else is thinking, you're the only one in the room who's thinking, why are you so bad at this? You came all the way to India. It's such a waste.

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So when we jump on that train of-self judgment and criticism, not only are we extending the period of the distraction, sometimes considerably, but it's so exhausting, it's so demoralizing. You don't emerge thinking, I'm going to go forward and learn a new skill. It's not onward leading. And that's one of the glaring things I began to see. It's like, oh, I want to get something done. I want to get better at this. I want to accomplish something. These long rants against myself, it's not the way. It's really not the way.

Alex Howard

Of course, one of the things that's challenging is that when we've been wired up in a certain way, as you described, that we may recognize this is not the way, but then we've got to change that sometimes decades of habit and practice. So I'm curious as to when you're teaching or working with folks that are in that place, as you describe, where they're like, I don't want to keep being this way with myself and other people, how do people start to cultivate that different place?

Sharon Salzberg

Well, part of it is the emphasis, like most people I meet think of meditation as an example, because that's what I do, but, again, it doesn't have to be meditation, any process of looking at one's thoughts and feelings more clearly. Most people, in terms of meditation, have this idea that a good meditation is going to look like having no thoughts, like a perfectly clear mind, all serene, maybe a little blissful, but certainly not turbulent or restless. And we don't believe that's true.

The purpose of the practice is not to get rid of thoughts. It's to develop a different relationship to thoughts, a different relationship to feelings, to sensations, to everything, really. And so you may have a lot of thoughts, you might have hateful thoughts, you might have a torrent of thoughts, it could be very good meditation, depending on how you are relating to them, but people don't generally believe that. And so really emphasizing that moment of beginning again, doesn't matter how much your mind wanders, truly, doesn't matter if you fall asleep, doesn't matter where your mind goes to. But it's that ability to let go and start over that we're really cultivating.

And it's what one of my teachers called exercising the letting go muscle. And that's a life skill. That's something, if you think about a day, a day at work or a day with the family or something, how many times do we have to kind of course correct? We realize, oh, I blew it. Let me start over, or let me re-approach this or whatever it is, or we just lie there on the ground and that's not useful. So the more we emphasize that ability to begin again, that's really the heart of resilience and that's the beginning of a healthy relationship because you're not endlessly lamenting having fallen down but you're looking at the capacity we all have to get up again and start over. And it changes a lot of things.

Alex Howard

And I think that's often the real challenging place, right? Because as you said earlier, that more brutal pushing of ourselves might get short term productivity but it then goes off a cliff and it's not sustainable. But then if the only way that we've known how to get ourselves to do things is to be harsh and cruel with ourselves, and we need to do something because not doing anything, it's going to stay the same, but it's how to cultivate that new way of efforting towards something. And I'm curious how you help people navigate that piece.

[00:20:19] Sharon Salzberg

Well, partly it is just that encouragement, like, doesn't matter that you fell asleep, truly. And what we see is if in general, let's say, again, in meditation, it's one breath and then you're gone for half an hour, you will start to see it'll be one breath, that may not change that much at first, but you'll be gone for 15 minutes rather than half an hour before it feels uncomfortable to be so alienated from yourself and you go, all right, let me just start again. And then 15 minutes becomes five minutes. And then you begin to see that it's really different.

Like I still lost it with my kids and I got overwhelmed by impatience, but you know what? That used to last all day. Now it's lasting 15 minutes. That's a big change in the quality of my life. And the best encouragement comes from observation of change. And really the only important kind of change is in life. I mean, it doesn't really matter to anybody in the end if you're with 3000 breaths before your mind wanders. But how are you with your kids? That's what really matters. And that's where we look for the change.

Alex Howard

It just struck me as you were talking, Sharon, that in a way there are different types of kindness. There's a kindness that, as I think about it, is a soft, nourishing holding, kind of supportive quality. And then there's a kindness that's a bit firmer and a bit more, this may feel difficult, but the kind act is to move through. And I wonder, is it helpful to distinguish kindness in different ways? Because my thought is that if one has a very simplistic perspective of kindness, there can actually be a trap as opposed to a facilitator of, actually, the thing that's most kind in this instance is this thing that I've been putting off or procrastinating for however long.

Sharon Salzberg

Well, the distinction we usually make is between, yes, I think that's exactly right, but the way we usually express it is there's a distinction that can be made between the motivation for an action and the expression of an action. So more and more, hopefully, one is not motivated by fear, for example, in what we do or what we say or what we hold back from doing or saying, which is its own kind of action. More and more over time, we're motivated by a sense of connection, of care and so on, of kindness, basically or lovingkindness, or lovingkindness and compassion. So that's why we tend to do things.

What we do hopefully will get more and more skillful as we pay attention to context, we realize choices. Maybe we, in general, have had very few, very little, of a sense of options. But the more we grow, being aware, being present, listening, the more options we might see as a response to someone, for example. And so those responses, that kind of action is always sort of considered to be in the moment. And that can be very varied. It's like saying there's such a thing as tough love.

The motivation is genuine love. It's not to be nasty, it's not to feel better than someone else. But the action can be firm, it can be fierce, it can be intense. I call it our best guess of the most appropriate or skillful way to respond in a moment. And so that's also people's fear about something like kindness, that if we were to develop a more open heart, if we were to be devoted to the idea of kindness, then we can only say yes, can only smile pleasantly, can only let them move back in, we can only give them more money, we can only let ourselves be hurt again.

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And none of that is true because the action needs wisdom as part of it. You need understanding like yeah, this doesn't make any sense, they're still drinking, they can't move back in right now, whatever it might be. But the motivation doesn't have to be rejection and hatred, it can also be kind. And I think people get weirded out because they think oh, were I to be kinder, I could only say yes. And it's not true. Because action can take many, many forms depending on our best guess basically of what's most skillful.

Alex Howard

I guess that's a real skill, to be able to effectively say no and hold a boundary, but to do it in a genuinely kind way, not like in a defensive or reactive way.

Sharon Salzberg

Yeah, and boundaries have a lot to do with it. And that's part of the balance of having kindness for ourselves as well.

Alex Howard

I guess sometimes when we've had a history of being kind to others and not kind to ourselves, that can be the tricky thing, firstly, to even recognize that a boundary is needed, but secondly, to actually really hold that boundary. And sometimes when we've been in dynamics for a long time with people, it's almost like the more we hold the boundary, the harder they push to try and try and knock it down.

Sharon Salzberg

It's true. I have a friend who said she describes herself as the kind of person who effectively can never say no. So, like at work, for example, people were always giving her these tasks which were not her job, but she was doing them anyway. And so what she did in her meditation was she imagined, she sort of brought up in her mind, the kind of scenario where she was asked that sort of inappropriate request. And she studied what happened in her body and she felt like this very visceral kind of wave of panic just starting in her stomach and coming up, long before, long in terms of real conversation, before the words would come in her mind, maybe they won't like me anymore if I say no.

So she learned that sense of panic and that became her feedback system, where if she was at work and she was asked that kind of question and she'd feel that very thing start coming up in her stomach, that was her signal to say, I'll have to get back to you about that. I'm in New York City, can you hear the sirens?

Alex Howard

It's not coming through, but having been there, I can imagine.

[00:27:03] Sharon Salzberg

Okay, good. She would say, I have to get back to you on that. And once she had some space, she could then return and say, sorry, I can't do that. And that's an interesting tool as well, to realize that we are going to have this kind of response. It's hard to set a boundary for many of us, it's very difficult. And if we can catch that tendency to just fall into an old response, and often what's happening in our bodies is the clue, then we can have the possibility of saying no or saying no a little bit later, or just feeling, okay, that's my edge right there. And this is where I'm going to try to experiment with another way of being.

Alex Howard

You mentioned the word love a few minutes ago. What do you see as the role of love within kindness? What's that relationship?

Sharon Salzberg

Well, I think of love as connection and oddly enough, not necessarily something very emotional either. Of course, one manifestation of love is the emotion that so many of us long for. There was a movie, I don't know, maybe 13 years ago now, 14 years ago now, called *Dan in Real Life* and one of the lines in the movie was very important for me. One of the characters says, love is not a feeling, it's an ability. Love is not a feeling, it's an ability. And of course, it can be seen as a feeling. But that really struck me as powerful because seeing love as a feeling also in my mind made it seem more like a commodity and very much in the hands of someone else.

I used to have this image of the delivery person standing in front of my door holding this package and glancing down at the address and saying, no, I don't think so, I'm walking away. And I'm going, wait a minute, then there's no love in my life, it's all in your hands. Whereas if we see love as an ability, it's within us to care, to connect, to listen, to be present with, however we might define it, and other people certainly might ignite it or inspire it or threaten it, but ultimately it's ours.

And that's how I see love. It's that capacity we all have to actually connect, to be fully present with, to open to, rather than just holding our idea of somebody or assumption or what someone else told us about them, or whatever it is, to truly be there in some way is how I would define love. And seeing it as an ability is also kind of awesome because that also means it's a responsibility.

If I want love to be present in a room, maybe I have to be the one bringing it in, or present in a conversation or an encounter, maybe it's up to me. But also seeing it as a capacity is inspiring. It's something that you don't have to feel I'm starting from nothing and I have no ability and my family was bad. We all, as I said, have this capacity for connection that is never destroyed, no matter what we may have gone through and it's on that basis that we do this work.

Alex Howard

Also by seeing love as an ability, if we feel that there's a deficiency of love in our life, we can do something to transform that. One of the things that I really like doing is starting little conversations with people that you wouldn't normally do that with. So there's many opportunities for this in London, like on the London Underground or shopkeepers or someone that's cleaning the streets, whatever it may be, and just going up to someone and just appreciating them and acknowledging them. And once they realize you're not going to try and steal their wallet or something, there's a

genuine lighting up. It surprises me how often someone that appears to be having a really bad day lights up when they feel that sense of connection.

[00:31:25] Sharon Salzberg

Yeah, and people are interesting too. I'm in New York City right now, and I grew up in New York City. And somebody said to me once one of the things they lament about modern New York City is the absence of so many conversations like that. Because it used to be like that all the time. If you sat on a bus, you would chat to the person next to you. But now everyone's on their phone pretty much. So it's kind of different and people are lonelier as a result.

Alex Howard

Yeah, I know you wrote a book a number of years ago called *Love Your Enemies*, which, by the way, I love the title, it's a great title. And I'm interested in this, obviously it's a whole book and it's a big subject but I'm interested in the place where loving people, well, loving enemies, but particularly where maybe there still needs to be boundaries or how you sort of help guide people with that. And I'm going to give you a little bit of context of my thinking around this question and particularly with trauma as well.

One of the things that I've seen happen is people go off and do very powerful transformational work around certain relationships or people in their life and they come back and something in them is significantly healed. And you can feel something's moved. But then there's a sort of almost unconscious assumption that that's changed in the other person and they re-enter the relationship and then are deeply wounded by the fact the same dynamic plays out. And so this place of forgiveness and love but also where kind of boundaries sit with that.

Sharon Salzberg

Yeah, I mean it's a crucial question and I get asked some variation of that all the time because I teach so much of this particular practice of lovingkindness meditation and were I to develop more love, does that mean I have to let my son move back in even though he was abusing me? Or does that mean I have to visit my father in jail who is in jail because he abused me? Or does that mean I have to see this person in my life and I don't feel safe being in their presence? Does that mean I have to approach them?

No. I mean, again, we make a sharp distinction between the internal world we are creating of how we hold someone, what we wish for them and so on and the action we may take. And the action is very contextual. It has to be based on wisdom as well as everything else, and history and all of that feeds into it. It's based on so many things like, how tired are you right now? How much support do you have in the rest of your life? And many things will go into the decision to let them move back in or not or give them more money or not.

And that's important. But the interstate doesn't have to be tortured by that kind of overwhelming obsession with someone else's actions which we fall into. As one of my friends who will describe himself as a kind of obsessive type, like something happens and he can't let go of it, thinks about the grudge or thinks about the incident again and again and again. He went through a period like that and then he said to me I think it's actually an AA, an Alcoholics Anonymous, statement. He said I let him live rent free in my brain for too long.

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And you realize that and you think, I don't want that for myself. I want to be free. But that doesn't mean I have to visit or we have to have dinner together and that confusion or that conflation is what has many people hold back from the development of that kind of inner freedom because they think they will then be bound to act in a certain way. And I really do not believe we are and we never want to let go of wisdom, which also means balance. And the balance will always include some consideration of ourselves.

Alex Howard

It can take, though, if someone has been in a coercive or manipulative relationship for a long time, it can take a lot of, I guess, courage, but also strength, because when one becomes softer in themselves, particularly if someone's in a relationship with someone that's very strong and sort of toxic in their behavior, that any kind of softness is almost seen as a chance to get in and to reestablish that dynamic.

Sharon Salzberg

Yeah. And sometimes it's not a path that I'd ever, I mean, circumstances are different for different people, but I would never want to encourage someone if they have the option of having a sense of community or not. I'd always say, well, the sense of community is really good, not to feel so totally alone. I have friends who, long term friends now because I met them in India when I first started out, who would not hesitate to kind of look at me and say, are you crazy, why are you thinking about that, and who have that kind of vocabulary that can make the distinction between the inner freedom I seek and they seek and one particular manifestation of kindness in a certain situation.

And they say, I don't think so or I'm not going to let you do that alone or I'm going to go to the hospital with you or I think you can't do that alone. Let's think of a rotating cast of characters who can go with you. And it's just perspective. And so maybe you have a counselor, a therapist or friends or a meditation teacher or meditation community, whoever it might be, or people who have the same kind of challenge in their lives.

We just get a sense of perspective from one another, which can be very handy because it's true, we can have a strange sense of obligation based on our past or we might have a really weird, and many people do, kind of savior mentality like, I've got to fix this, I've got to fix them. I've got to be the one to march back in there and make it all okay, for the billionth time I'll try, and it's not going to work. And so to have that kind of mirroring process is really useful.

Alex Howard

Also struck me as you were talking, particularly when there's heaviness and complexity in these relationships, what's the role of playfulness and humor and softness in kindness? How does that sense of play, how does that support kindness? Does it support kindness?

Sharon Salzberg

I think it does because there's such audacity and as you say, courage in being willing to say, I need something too. It's so different for many of us that being almost able to laugh at it is a good thing. It was part of a four year program bringing tools of mindfulness and yoga to frontline workers in

domestic violence shelters, so it was really the staff we were working with and the program went on and then at one point, directors and supervisors of shelters wanted their own program. And so we created a kind of parallel program and they came up with a phrase which they called a culture of wellness.

[00:39:45]

They wanted to help establish a culture of wellness at work. And that meant different things for different people. And the culture might mean your body and mind, it might mean your desk, it might mean your team, it might mean your whole shelter. And this one woman said, I've decided that to help establish a culture of wellness at work, I'm going to have to start taking a lunch break. And everyone in the room who did not work at a shelter, we were all shocked.

And we said, you don't take a lunch break? Isn't it in your contract? And she said, oh, it's in my contract, but there's never enough time. There's so much to do, there's always a crisis, so much pain, she said, but I can't go on anymore and never have a break. So because we were meeting in between retreats, we got to check on her progress. So she came in maybe two weeks later and she said, didn't work. She said, I closed the door, but someone crouched down and looked through the keyhole and they saw I was in there and I couldn't get a break.

Maybe three weeks after that, she came back and she was like beaming, and she said, it worked, said, I closed the door and turned off the lights. I got a break. And we all laughed. And she laughed. And you have to just sort of say, yeah, I'm being different. It's going to look weird. Let me try this, let me try that, and just kind of have a good time with it.

Alex Howard

Yeah, that's great. I'm going to ask you a question that's got sort of two parts to it. I want to explore where people can start and in a minute, I'd like to talk about how people can start with your work and some signposts towards website programs and so on. But in terms of any practical starting points right now, for someone that's been watching or listening to this interview, what's something simple that they can do to just start to invite more kindness into their life?

Sharon Salzberg

I think if it's kindness toward oneself that we're really talking about, there's another exercise we did with that kind of program that I've taken to many places, and so I'm going to describe it as journaling. It could just be reflection. I think it's a great starting place. So in one column we have people consider, because they were, generally speaking, doing the same kind of work, what is the greatest source of stress at your work? And it doesn't have to be work, it could be your life. Like, what's the greatest source of stress?

And that, I think, was just interesting for people, because sometimes it was a surprise, here were these people working in domestic violence shelters. There were terrible, terrible stories and all kinds of things. And they often didn't point to that. They pointed to bad communication with a colleague or something like that. So that was one column. The next column was very important. It's like, what do you do to get a break? To be kind to yourself? To feel some ease of heart? To get perspective? And in four years, I think every single person wrote down, I listen to music. There was all kinds of different music.

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Some people had a strong faith tradition, and they'd write that down. Or people would write down things like, I get out in nature. Or sometimes people would write down things like, I drink a lot. And then in the next column we said, look back at what you just wrote down and write down how you feel about it. So if they had written down I drink a lot, often they would say, ooh, I'm kind of worried about that. And this is a true story. So I did that exercise once with military caregivers, like chaplains and medics within the military, and someone had written down, I get out in nature, I kayak, it's amazing. I get a whole new sense of things and refreshment. And then the next column he wrote down, I haven't done that in about seven years.

Alex Howard

Wow.

Sharon Salzberg

So then you go, well, maybe... Because often we do have means that we know will help us develop greater kindness toward ourselves, and we're just not doing them. And so that's a great starting point. And then maybe resolve, I'm going to meditate five minutes a day, or I'm going to take a walk every day, even if it's just outside, whatever it might be and then, you know, little things will really make a difference.

Alex Howard

Yeah. Wonderful. Sharon, for people that want to find out more about you and your work, where's the best place to go? And what's some of what they can find?

Sharon Salzberg

Well, there's my website, which is just sharonsalzberg.com. I have my 12th book that just came out.

Alex Howard

Check you out. That's something.

Sharon Salzberg

Yeah. So some of them are very distinct guides to meditation of different kinds, and some are more general about life. This one is called *Real Life*. It's a more general one. And I have a teaching schedule, right now it's still all online, but it's all there. It's all there on the website.

Alex Howard

Wonderful. Sharon, thank you so much for your time. I've really enjoyed our conversation and I really appreciate it.

Sharon Salzberg

Thank you. I've really enjoyed it as well.