**The Good Clean Nutrition Podcast**

**Episode 21 Transcript**

**Episode 21: Meditation & Mindful Goal Setting with Jill Wener, MD**

Jill Wener, MD:

Getting really clear on how we want to feel, maybe, rather than a specific number, and then also really digging deep on, like, what feels good for me.

Mary Purdy, MS, RDN:

Happy new year and welcome to The Good Clean Nutrition Podcast. I'm your host, Mary Purdy, integrative dietitian and nutrition educator. We want to begin by wishing you a happy new year, and thank you for joining us for another season of The Good Clean Nutrition Podcast. Now leading up to the new year, we hear a lot about New Year's resolutions, for better or for worse, and a lot of people, well, they start making unsustainable resolutions when it comes to their health, like extreme weight loss, fitness goals, and then they quit once they realize that they're kind of unrealistic. Well, today we're going to unpack that and we're going to share tips on how to set realistic goals and how to bring in things like meditation to actually help you make real sustainable change. Joining us today is Dr. Jill Wener, an internal medicine physician and conscious health meditation instructor.

Dr. Wener completed her medical training at Emory University School of Medicine and meditation training in Rishikesh, India. In addition to her online and in-person meditation courses, Jill leads meditation retreats all over the world. She's also the co-creator of the Conscious Anti-Racism training programs in which she combines her insights from her own anti-racism journey with her mind-body expertise, and 10 years of experience practicing medicine. As a healthcare professional myself and someone who really values meditation, I'm really excited to hear her unique perspective on how she thinks we can take New Year's resolutions and bring a little bit of meditation and mindfulness into them and change maybe the culture surrounding them. So, welcome, Dr. Wener. Welcome, Jill.

Jill:

Thanks so much for having me.

Mary:

I'd love to start off by hearing your perspective in terms of how you started off as a physician, and then decided to start a whole new journey or pathway around a meditation practice and actually becoming a meditation instructor. So, what made you get into the field of meditation?

Jill:

Burnout, really, really profoundly painful burnout. In 2011, I had been attending for about five years and the residency work hours changed and it just was all kind of a perfect storm. I think there had been a few life events leading up to that as well, looking back like, oh yeah, I was about to break and I didn't really realize it. And I was never someone who would want to meditate or talk about meditation. I wasn't looking for it, but I went to a spa in Arizona, in August of 2011. Did a really cool program with horses there that just cracked my brain open just a little bit where I was like, there is something else to this world other than what I'm perceiving directly. And then two months later as my burnout, persisted, I met someone who told me they meditated twice a day and went to go hear their teacher speak.

And I just was like, I need to learn this yesterday. This is exactly what I need. And I never really would've ever been open to it. I was always very skeptical and type A and doctor focused. That, almost immediately, I started to feel better and sort of opened me up to a different way of being in the world and feeling in my body. And for me, I respect that burnout isn't healed by meditation. For me personally, it really was what I needed and that helped me so much.

Mary:

Nice. It's amazing what burnout will do in terms of the new path that it can send people on. And I have a feeling people who are listening can really resonate with that because burnout happens quickly, especially for a lot of healthcare practitioners. So, hearing your personal journey and knowing that there can be another road forward for many people, I think is really helpful, whether you are a practitioner or not.

I'd love to actually dive into goal setting, because I think a lot of people with the new year, they're thinking about things that they should be doing to make their health better or be more fit. And people really struggle with how to set goals and then actually stay consistent with those goals. So, why do you think people have such a struggle with that?

Jill:

I think there's a perfectionism that permeates in our culture. There's a standard to which we compare ourselves of what we're supposed to look like and feel like and act like. And that trickles down into, all right, well, if I've gained some weight this year, or if I'm not exercising this many times, I'm bad. And then it's like, I should do all these things and go all in, but I got to do all of it yesterday. And really, I think maybe what happens, there's a million different reasons for all of this, but for me it's like, am I trying to please the outside source or am I connecting within myself and finding out what I actually want for me? And is my vision of what healthy looks like or attractive looks like, is that coming from inside of me and what feels right for me? Or am I trying to fit into something that isn't who I am or necessarily what I want for myself?

And if we're doing it for other people, it's going to be a lot harder to continue that because it's not an intrinsically, internally motivated thing. There's a lot of, you said should. There's shame and there's should in there, and that's bringing a journey towards feeling better. Whatever that looks like should be a positive thing. We hope it's a positive thing. I just should, I've said it too.

Mary:

And that idea of it coming from external forces as opposed to coming from within, I think makes a really big difference because you're trying to please somebody else or you're trying to stick to some standard that's been laid out for you as opposed to it coming really organically. And I think a lot of that comes from self-compassion, which I think you speak about a lot. So, where does self-compassion fit into the conversation around setting goals for oneself?

Jill:

I feel like self-compassion is the answer to everything. And I'm not even joking. I learned this meditation practice in 2011 and it did so much for me. And then I learned EFT tapping and that helped me a lot too. I'm getting somewhere with this, I promise. That helped me too. I became a practitioner in it, love that. And I still had all this perfectionism and there were just still parts of my journey that I was beating myself up about a lot. And the therapist that I actually see specializes in self-compassion work, and it is the balm to my soul. It is nectar. And I mean it's helped me with so much.

And I think that a lot of times we think self-compassion, we're going to just give up. If I'm nice to myself, then I'm not going to be motivated and I'm going to just let it all go, whatever it means and whatever letting it all go means.

I think shifting what we think self-compassion is, allowing ourselves to be as we are, and not trying to fight that so much and not trying to have shame around that. It's not just about I need to love myself at any size, because yes, that too. But it's like, anything I do, I don't have to shame myself for it. And so, going into any sort of goal setting, if I make it great, if I don't make it great, I'm still perfect as I am, and I think that's something that we forget and we're not taught to think about it in that way.

Mary:

Yeah. I've had patients in the past who have tried to set goals for themselves around something that feels very lofty, I'm not going to eat dairy anymore, or I'm not going to eat anymore sugar. And then they come back and they feel terrible that they had a night where they actually engage in eating something that they felt they shouldn't. And when we break it down to let's actually talk about what was going on for you that night, and let's use more kind words as you're discussing, not like I'm a terrible person or I have no willpower, but I had a challenging evening and I was feeling really sad about my job and my relationship. So, really shifting the way that people talk to themselves or the internal dialogue that happens feels like such an important part of this conversation.

Jill:

Yeah, absolutely.

Mary:

And what about when we think about people getting started on the goal setting steps, what do you feel is a good... We know that self-compassion is, or the groundwork, if someone does want to make a goal for themselves, what is a really good way to begin that process?

Jill:

I feel like my thoughts about this have changed over the years for sure. I feel like getting really clear on how we want to feel maybe rather than a specific number, and then also really digging deep on what feels good for me. What feels like the right thing inside? We are taught in this society, in my medical training to disconnect completely from our bodies. It's like two different things. I was a walking body that had a head, but we weren't communicating at all. I sort of knew what felt right for me, but I also really didn't. And so, finding a way to reconnect into, what is my intuition telling me? Is this the right thing for me? And whose voice is telling me? Who am I listening to? Am I listening to what I actually want and what feels like it would be the right move for me?

Or am I listening to the voice of a parent who used to make comments about our weight or a spouse or a ex-friend or whoever it is, the media, wherever we're going to go with that? Is this what's right for me? Do I have this sense that when I get there, I'm then going to be happy? Because I think that's a big thing as well, this sense that I'm broken now, if I just do this thing that I'm supposed to be doing and I get there, then I'm going to be happy, and all my problems are going to be solved. And getting really real with us of why am I doing this. If I'm doing this because I want to engage in the process and I think it will help me be more present in my life and have more energy and whatever else, awesome. That's going to motivate us forward. If I'm doing it because I'm miserable and I think that this is the answer to me not being miserable anymore, that sounds to me not sustainable.

Mary:

Yeah. So, not focusing on a number or something specific that you want to achieve, but rather, how do I want to feel? Do I want to feel strong in my body? Do I want to feel powerful? Do I want to feel at peace, that calm? I think what you're saying about just connecting to an emotion, a sense of wellbeing in the body, that really makes a big difference when it comes to setting those goals.

And it sounds like some of these methods that you're talking about, meditation and tapping really help. And we're going to break those both down because I have a feeling people out there are wondering, what does she mean by tapping? But first, we're going to take a quick break.

I’m Mary Purdy and you’re listening to The Good Clean Nutrition Podcast. We’re on with internal medicine physician and meditation instructor Dr. Jill Wener discussing sustainable goal setting and next, we’re gonna dive into the importance of bringing meditation in when setting goals, but first, a word from our sponsor of this podcast, Orgain.

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Mary:

Now let's get back to our conversation with Dr. Wener!

So, Jill, we want to shift gears here a little bit more. Before the break, we were talking a bit or you were talking a bit about meditation and tapping and bringing those into conversations around goal setting. We got to understand here what tapping is. You mentioned EFT, emotional freedom technique. For those who are not familiar with the old tap, tap, give us a definition of what that actually means.

Jill:

So, tapping, EFT, emotional freedom technique, it's all the same, referring to the same thing. It's actually an evidence-based technique. There's lots of great data on it for anyone who wants to look under emotional freedom technique, not tapping, because that's its more clinical name. You tap on different places on the face and chest that are related to the places in traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture where one might be putting needles in. But we use accu-pressure or the tapping, and we tap on places on the face and chest as we say out loud the things that are distressing us.

It can be used for a bunch of different things, phobias, decision-making, self-limiting beliefs, emotions, grief, all sorts of things. As we say out loud over and over again the thing that is distressing us and we tap, we are actually sending calming signals to the stress center of the brain, the hippocampus and amygdala, rewiring how they process stress and how they perceive stress, and also activating this parasympathetic nervous system.

So, the tapping can be, it's more like I think of meditation like preventative. You meditate twice a day so that overall, you're shifting more into parasympathetic mode and you're less stressed. Tapping is really good as like a spot cleaner. You can use it for five, 10 minutes at a time. Benefits come very quickly, very few side effects and you don't have to do it regularly to benefit from it. So, I've been using it a lot during COVID to support healthcare professionals to process all these emotions that have come up during this time.

Mary:

Yeah, I have to tell you, I have worked with a practitioner using tapping for my fear of going to the dentist, which is not as severe as some of the other traumas that people might be using it for. But I did find it to be helpful and it's great to know that there is some evidence behind it really establishing its benefits for people who are going through so many difficult times. So, in terms of the meditation piece, there's so much about meditation that we know has health benefits. And you're a physician, you obviously are very clued into the physiology of the body, but also as a meditation instructor, the way that the brain works. I would love to hear what you have found to be beneficial around meditation and what's some of the research that's supporting that.

Jill:

So, they have done studies about all sorts of different things ranging from learning disabilities and ADHD to hypertension, to free radical formation, and all sorts of different things. And it shows that meditation can benefit those, improve those things.

I love data and I also love things that I can experience myself and teach people to experience on their own without being dependent on me. So, the meditation practice that I teach, it's like I'm teaching people how to do this meditation on their own self-sufficiently. And they experience it very, very quickly, the benefits of it, how easy it is to do.

I have a student who had really bad irritable bowel disease and she was looking to go to a GI doctor, and she said her irritable bowel went away in a couple weeks. Now, does that happen to everybody? No. Am I going to promise that meditation is going to heal your irritable bowel? No. But it's pretty cool that that worked. And it actually helped for my own irritable bowel as well. Another one of my students had chronic neck and shoulder pain, and after a few weeks she realized that she wasn't feeling that anymore because a lot of that was related to stress. So, if we think about all the ways that stress can impact our body on a physical noticeable level, and then also on a biochemical level, anything that stress is impacting can be improved with things that are going to decrease stress.

Now the question is always going to be what's the extent, is it reproducible? Is it consistent among people? And everyone's going to be different with that. And so, I guess one of the other things you had talked about, two of my meditation students, one of them is the chair of medicine at a hospital in Connecticut. And she says she really loves the practice because it helps... When we're in stress mode and we're in survival all the time, it's really hard to connect into anything else. We're just trying to get through. And so, she says she has found, when she's meditating, she gets really great solutions to administrative issues that she's been trying to work through. She'll get these inspiration moments, these aha moments where, oh, okay, if I just do this, this and this, then that'll help make everyone happy. That'll be a good compromise. So, stuff that she wasn't able to think about when she was in her stress mode.

Another one of my meditation students shared that she's a surgeon and she was working on a difficult case that people misdiagnosed or couldn't figure out what the issue was. And she realized, oh, it's a pheochromocytoma, which is a tumor that can cause all sorts of hormonal imbalances in the body. For anyone listening who is not in healthcare, I just grossly under described pheochromocytoma. But I don't think that's important. But it was not something that was obvious. A lot of people had missed it. And when she was meditating, it came to her as a like, oh. So, we do get insights and a lot more creativity and people actually can get more efficient. So, it's not like, meditate more so I can extract more work out of you, but it's helped me a lot and a lot of other people being more efficient and being able to get things done more quickly without feeling that like beleaguered, like drained, bleary-eyed kind of feeling. So, it can help get us rested again so that we can then do whatever it is that we want to be doing.

Mary:

Yeah. I mean it's so great that you talked a bit about the research and how that doesn't always apply to every situation. And this idea of when we do things that allow us to tap into our bodies and experience from within, reduce our stress, connect with our minds, our heart, wherever we are connecting, that ultimately sounds like that is just a pathway towards better health and more stability, less cortisol, which can be beneficial for all the physiological illnesses that we see as practitioners and that we experience.

I want to make sure that people understand that meditation is different from mindfulness. There is a mindfulness meditation, but can you just really briefly tell us the difference in your mind, what mindfulness is versus what meditation might be?

Jill:

Sure, yes, absolutely. And apologies in advance for any mindfulness experts who do not agree with the way I'm describing it. Mindfulness is derived from Buddhist contemplative practices and has sort of been like despiritualized, but it's a way to cultivate focus and attention on anything with the goal of doing the practice on something else, so that in our lives we become more mindful and aware and present. So, we may be focusing on the breath, we might be focusing on a mantra or other affirmation. We could be focusing on physical sensations in our bodies or our thoughts, but ultimately, we're focusing and we're using effort to keep our minds trained on this one thing. Now we all know the mind wanders, and so if we're being taught mindfulness hopefully properly or in a trauma informed way, we're going to be kind to our thoughts that come and we're going to not beat ourselves up about it.

But still, ultimately, the goal is to be focused specifically on this one thing. And that allows us to be present with our family when we're eating dinner. And there's all sorts of ways to do mindfulness. Mindfulness can be just like I'm being mindful about how I'm using technology, or it can be an actual sit down formal practice, or walking practice, or however someone might want to do it. Self-compassion is a form of mindfulness.

Meditation, the type that I teach is we use as little effort as possible, because we are actively, we're trying to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and in doing so we want to be... Mindfulness, often you'll be sitting up straight with maybe your legs crossed. Like a very, what is the word that they use sometimes, not a noble posture, but I think dignified posture. There's nothing dignified about the way that I meditate. It looks sloppy. We always want to have back support, we want to be somewhat upright. But people try to take pictures of me meditating for my website and it looks unattractive, because I'm slouching and people are wrapped up in blankets and stuff like that. So, it just doesn't look like what we think meditation should be.

We are not using effort. We're being effortless with...We do use a mantra, but we're not trying to focus on it. We're actually allowing our minds to wander. It's as easy as daydreaming. And by using as little physical and mental effort as possible, that's how we can unlock the access to that deep level of rest that activates a parasympathetic nervous system and resets, does a deep internal reset of our body chemistry and our brain chemistry, and allows us to have access to. And this is by the way, every single person I've taught can do this very easily. It is a very easy technique to do within the first two days of learning it. Not everyone continues it because we're all human. And it is something like for anyone listening who's like, there's no way I could do this or that's only for other people, that was how I felt. **I** remember when I learned, I was like, how has this been a thing? How has this been around and I didn't know that this existed and that people like me aren't taught this? So, that’s the difference, is we're intentionally not focusing. We're being as effortless and lazy as possible when we're actually doing the practice.

Mary:

Okay. Thank you for sharing those differences. And you mentioned, gosh, how did I not know about this as a physician? And I think any health practitioner, gosh, it would be amazing for this to be part of the curriculum when we know it has so much value.

So, how do you recommend if there are people who are listening today who are practitioners, how can they bring in meditation into their interactions with patients or clients?

Jill:

We want to make sure that we're not teaching our patients about it because we're secretly implying that they're crazy like, oh, well, you should try meditation because you're just stressed out and all your problems are due to stress and just try meditation. Because that's portraying a message to our patients that they are somehow wrong for having stress, that they're somehow wrong for having stress related physical symptoms and that's somehow weak or bad. And I think that we convey that a lot, and I did as well. I'd be like, hello, why don't we try some guided meditation or whatever, and people can see right through that.

So, I think it's important for us to understand that it's not just some woo-woo thing that we only use for our patients who have stress related health things, because all of it's stress related, but we actually see it as a gift.

And we also have to respect that not everybody's going to be ready to do it or want to do it, just the same way people generally don't like being proselytized to about other things such as perhaps religion or politics. Until they're ready to hear it, they're not going to want to hear it. So, it can make people shut down very quickly if they perceive like they're being judged or we think we're holier than now by talking about meditation.

So, I think before we do anything else, we need to gauge our patients, ask questions like, I have some thoughts on some things that have really helped me and a lot of my patients, is it something you're open to hearing? What has your experience been with this? Just being very open-ended and asking permission and giving people agencies so they don't immediately shut down and back off. And even then, they may still shut down and get defensive because we're human beings and that's what we do.

Mary:

Yeah, I think a lot of people are resistant to meditation or they think, oh, I can't do it and my mind's too crazy or whatever. And so, I really appreciate the idea of asking them questions or helping you as somebody who's either a friend or a practitioner, working with them, helping you to understand where they are ready to make that change if they're ready to make that change, and what would be an easy roadmap to get there.

I know that there's probably people out there and it's a stressful time in general. We probably all could use a little self-compassion. Maybe we could probably all use a little quiet, calm, mindful time. I am wondering if you would be able to walk us through a brief self-compassion session.

Jill:

Sometimes when people do self-compassion practices, there can be, it's called back draft. It's this opposite effect. Instead of feeling like, oh, I've been so kind to myself, there can be a, I'm the worst person ever, I've just remembered everything bad I ever did.

So, I just always like to share that before I lead anyone in self-compassion exercises because there's no right answer to how one experiences a self-compassion exercise. And it is a practice. We've probably heard this before, but the first time we do it, we may feel numb, we may feel nothing. We may feel joy, we may feel self-hate. There's all different emotions that may come up and we want to just be like, all of those things are exactly as they're supposed to be. And if and when we try again, that might shift.

Mary:

So, practice self-compassion when you're practicing self-compassion.

Jill:

Totally, right?

Mary:

Very meta.

Jill:

Very meta. But a lot of times people will try these practices and have horrible experiences and not understand why, and then run away from them forever because they don't understand that what they've been through is actually normal. It's just not what we're taught to think is normal.

Mary:

Well, take us through a practice and you can keep it real short.

Jill:

I'll keep it very short. And I would like to invite, so anyone listening, you're in a place where it feels safe, invite you to close the eyes or perhaps lower the gaze. Not mandatory, but if that's something that you feel like you want to do, I invite you to do that. And I invite you to call up a situation that's maybe like a two or three out of 10 intensity of discomfort for you. Not a 10 out of 10, not even a five out of 10, but something that's just because we're practicing this. So, a situation where you feel like you might be hard on yourself or where someone has been hard on you. A situation didn't go well at work, all sorts of things. Maybe one of your kids did something and you're blaming yourself for it.

And I invite you to call that up and allow that memory to come up for you. And if at any point it's too much, please do let this memory go. And now what I invite you to do is ask yourself what you need to hear that would make you feel better. Another way to think about this might be, what would you tell a friend who is saying the same thing to you? Or what would you want a friend to tell to you, to make you feel better? And I invite you to say that to yourself. It could be very simple. It could be like you're going to be okay, or you're perfect as you are, or something pretty simple. And one step further might be some sort of loving, compassionate touch for yourself. Maybe a hand on your shoulder or maybe you place your hand over your heart, or give yourself a hug, or something that just feels safe for you and nurturing for you.

Noting that our minds will probably wonder at least once during this practice and that anything that is coming up is normal. And if you are feeling some feelings of goodness, if you're feeling the effects of something, hearing something kind and of the compassionate touch, I invite you to savor that, to sit in that a little bit. And just what does that feel like? Is there a tingling? Is there a warmth or is there a lightness or maybe a heaviness in a good way? Just connect in with how that feels in our body and allow ourselves to feel that way. And if you're feeling less than that, if you're feeling less happy, if you're feeling some distressing symptoms or emotions, that's okay too. And whenever you're ready, I invite you to bring the attention back to the breath, just the rise and fall of the chest, the in and out of the air coming in and out of the nostrils. And whenever you feel ready, I invite you to open the eyes and come back to this space.

Mary:

Thank you, Jill. That was really nice.

Jill:

You're welcome.

Mary:

My phrase was, you did the best you could with the tools you had.

Jill:

Perfect. And how did that make you feel if you don't mind me asking?

Mary:

I felt good. I felt good. I felt a sense of peace around it. So, I appreciate the opportunity and I hope other people were able to take a moment, hopefully they weren't driving or anything like that. We should have said that upfront. If you're driving listening to this podcast, do not close your eyes.

Jill:

Do not close your eyes, yeah.

Mary:

Yes. Well, thank you so much for this conversation. Thank you for your kindness, for your compassion, for your knowledge, for your insights and everything else that you brought to our dialogue today. And I would imagine people listening want to know where they can find you and learn more about the work that you're doing.

Jill:

My website is a good place for that. It's jillwener.com. So, that's W-E-N-E-R, often misspelled. And that has information. I have meditation, online meditation and tapping programs. The meditation is accredited for continuing medical education and continuing education for doctors and nurses and pharmacists, and dietitians, and all sorts of allied health professionals. There's also a page on there that will take you to the anti-racism work I do as well. So, that will get you everywhere.

Mary:

Excellent. Well, I'm definitely going to be taking a look at some of those resources and really appreciate the work that you're doing around anti-racism as well. So, thank you again, Jill, for speaking with us today. And I hope people out there today and I'm sure they have, have really learned something from this conversation.

Jill:

Thanks for having me.

Mary:

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of The Good Clean Nutrition Podcast. And before you go, we would love to hear from you. We have a brief survey linked in the description of this podcast episode and on our website, healthcare.orgain.com/podcast. That is healthcare.orgain.com/podcast. Please share any feedback, give us guest ideas, topic suggestions, or anything else that you can think of. You name it, we want to hear it. And as always, your feedback is really appreciated, and it will only continue to help us improve this podcast. And to stay up to date on the latest episodes of this podcast, be sure to subscribe on your favorite podcast platform. Thanks so much and see you next time.