



S1:E8 "Meditating on ADHD" Transcript

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Karen Costa:

Welcome to the ADHD gallery, a podcast about teaching, learning and living with ADHD. My name is Karen Costa, and I'll be your host and curator. This podcast is for the ADHDers in the world. People like me. Join me to venture through this gallery of ideas, curiosities, brain science, random hyper focus interests, and reflections on what it's like to live with the gifts and many challenges of ADHD. Fellow dopamine hunters, let's be weird together. Stay connected at theADHDgallery.com. I'm aiming to be increasingly less active on social in the coming months and maybe even years. So my website and email newsletter will be the best way to stay in touch.

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Episode Eight of the ADHD gallery. Come on in. My name is Karen Costa, and I'm your host and curator. Today's episode is called "Meditating on ADHD."

Today I'm going to share a little bit about my meditation journey. Coming from someone who's practiced, studied meditation, also taught it. This is truly a both/and conversation and even that feels limiting when it comes to talking about meditating on ADHD. There is so much good that can come from a meditation practice. And it's also true in my experience, that certain messages and pressures about meditation also have the potential to shame people and to actually do harm. I think this is especially true for the ADHD community.

All right, we're gonna go way back. I started meditating when I was really young. I was eight years old when I first learned to meditate. And there's, you know, a story there. I was taught to meditate by my swim coach. I was a competitive swimmer, was part of a swim club. This was back in the 80s, and I can remember a very strong emphasis on training as hard as we could. And that winning was the absolute only goal, right, again, this was the 80s, different time, and again, I was eight years old, right? Train as hard as you can. We have to, when you're eight, we would have at the swim club, overnight retreats where we would swim, literally, for hours and hours. All day. Part of those



retreats are these sort of spiritual psychological trainings that we would undergo with our coaches to get into this winner's mindset. I was taught in these trainings, both yoga, I was told this is yoga, this is what we're teaching you, and meditation. I do want to say here that the yoga I was taught was purely the physical practice; there was never any discussion with us of the spiritual or you know, those psychological or philosophical underpinnings of yoga. It was learn to do these poses so that you can swim faster.

We were also taught meditation. Again, the goal of teaching us meditation was not anything to do with enlightenment, or spiritual, psychological, philosophical growth. It was: you can swim faster if you learn this practice. That is, obviously, I don't think I need to tell you, problematic. Again, eight years old. I remember way back when being taught by my coaches, primarily by the head coach, that 20 minutes of meditation was equivalent to four hours of sleep. I don't know anything about that. Today as somebody who studies teaching and learning and the brain and all those good things, sleep is so important, right? But the idea here was you can sleep less and therefore you can train more and therefore you can win, right? Even though there's obviously a lot of concerning things that were going on here. I can also say again, this is such a both/and conversation. Some of the goodness that is inherent in these practices did seep through, and while I recognized that this was, you know, a faulty foundation, it was still a foundation in my life for these practices.

I continued to be drawn to yoga and meditation on and off throughout my childhood and teenage years. And I definitely started to get drawn more into the physical practice of yoga. I was flexible, which I now know as somebody who has studied yoga, is not always a great thing to fully lean into. We need to be stable in our bodies and minds. And sometimes flexibility can do harm. Again, a both/and conversation. But I really loved for much of my life that vigorous asana practice, often in a vinyasa yoga class, I loved how I felt at the end of one of those classes. And then I would suffer through savasana or rest pose, or any type of meditation that teachers tried to infuse into classes that I would take. I would love that, you know, that burn of the physical practice, and then I would hate anything related to the mind. My mind in shavasana or meditation would be thinking, why won't my thoughts stop? I'm terrible at this. I hate it. I hate being terrible at things. Why am I not good at this? I hate it. I hate it. Why won't my thoughts stop? Or I would use that time and savasana or meditation to like, make my grocery list or think about what class, you know what homework I had to do. So it was very much me leaning into the physical and avoiding that mental aspect.



When I was in my late 20s, early 30s I was very interested in going to a lot of this really athletic yoga-pilates type class at my local gym. And when the physical part of class was done, I would roll up my mat and leave before savasana and meditation. And I told myself at the time, I am a person who can't sit still and I'm okay with that. I was like, I'm gonna embrace who I am. I don't need to sit here and pretend like I'm something I'm not. I'm gonna roll up my mat and leave. I wasn't the only one who did that, by the way.

A couple years after that, I started a yoga teacher training. This was the year after I left my full time higher ed administration job, which I've talked about in a previous episode. That was a really pivotal time in my life. I was also, in addition to this yoga, yoga teacher training, attending a 12 step recovery program for people who have family and friends with addictions. I was moving in the direction of quitting drinking myself, something that I ended up doing five and a half years ago. And again, I was also studying yoga and meditation. At the same time, though, I was deep into therapy and recovery so I was really working both of these angles at the same time. I think that's really important. As always take what you need and leave the rest. But that was really important for me. We have a concept in yoga world called spiritual bypass, and we see a lot of that as yoga teachers, folks who are struggling deeply with trauma, with stress, with mental illness, with just long held challenges, and they come to yoga and they do start feeling better. And then they go full bore into yoga world without ever addressing some of those underlying issues. So for me, I feel very lucky that I was able to work both sides of the equation.

And as I did that work, I became more comfortable sitting still. So again, I was somebody who had, you know, very proudly said before, I can't sit still and I'm fine with that. And I started to dig in a little bit to why I couldn't sit still. Now keep in mind, I had no idea at this point that I had ADHD. There are other things that can keep us from sitting still. Certainly, that was a factor, but there are other things that can keep us from sitting, so I probably was afraid, I was afraid, not probably, I was afraid to be alone with my thoughts and feelings. I would actually say I didn't really have feelings back then. Because the second I felt something, I did have feelings, but the second I felt them, I would immediately stuff them down. So sitting still without any external distractions would immediately bring up all that junk, all that stuff. And that was deeply uncomfortable, and I hadn't learned any of the tools or resources to deal with that.



So as I learned all of these skills and strategies through a variety of modalities, I was able to sit still. Even though I had ADHD back then, didn't know it. I was able to start to learn to move in the direction of being able to sit still.

I was also learning more about meditation, as I was learning how to teach it. We learn so much when we teach things right. I had previously had this idea, as I mentioned before, that the goal of meditation was to stop my thoughts. And what I have learned, what I learned back then, and what I continue to learn, first of all, is that the word goal maybe isn't great to associate with meditation, right? It's that achievement orientation. Perhaps it is better to say that we can arrive to meditation with the intention to observe our thoughts, rather than to mindlessly let them drag us around. right? Rather than trying to stop my thoughts, I'm going to observe them. So I can say, I'm thinking about the grocery list again, and then I give myself a gentle nudge to return to concentrating on maybe my breath or mantra. Why is that process of observing our thoughts and then returning to breath or mantra, why is that such a magical moment?

For me, that observation practice, which was part of how I approached meditation, taught me to notice and accept that change is constant. So just as my thoughts are always coming and always going, everything in the entire universe is always coming and always going. Everything that is good and everything that is bad, and everything in the middle is coming and going. So I learned through meditation, and other places, but meditation was one of the places I learned that, that if things are good I can take a deep breath and appreciate that goodness while it lasts. I also learned that if things are bad, I can take a deep breath and know that they will pass because everything comes and everything goes. Always has, always will, everything. And that's what's playing out inside of our heads. And it's playing out on this global scale as well. So that was what I came to know when I was finally able to be comfortable enough to sit still. That's what's true for me.

As I became more consistent in my meditation practice, I also started to teach basic meditation classes. I taught, and I still really, this is really fundamental to my teaching philosophy, I taught from the perspective that I was not a meditation expert, right? Come take a class from somebody who is not a meditation expert. Come take a class with somebody who has really struggled with meditation. So I showed up to hold space for other people who struggled, having gone through that struggle myself.



I was so tired of trying to learn from expert meditators, because I would sit with them, and they had forgotten what we call in meditation, many of them had forgotten what we call the beginner's mind. They were such experts that they could not hold space for me as somebody who was struggling. So it felt very important to me at that time to say, this is something I have struggled with, and I'm here to be with you as you struggle with it as well. And from my students, I heard time and time again, some variation of this idea of, I stink at meditation, because I can't get my thoughts to stop. Like, I don't know who's telling people that, but they're out there, and there's a lot of them, and apparently they're very loud, because this was the message that so many of my students had started to believe. It was a message I had believed for a very long time as well. So a big part of my work back then as a meditation teacher was to help people let go of that shame and frustration that they felt for not meditating, right?

It was really funny, one day somebody came to my meditation class, and she had formerly taken that really physical asana class with me at the gym. And after the workshop, she said to me, Karen, that was really helpful. You know, I'm seeing this in a new way. And I have to chuckle to myself, because I'm here in your class learning so much from you about meditation, but I remember when you would run out of the gym before. And, you know, we laughed together, and I was like, no, that's like the point, right? That's why I'm here.

The other thing that a lot of my students would tell me is that they felt like, or they had been told that they, quote unquote, had to meditate for 20 minutes twice a day. And that when they couldn't do that, or that didn't feel accessible for them, they felt like failures. So I would help reframe that for people, and I would say, start with a minute. Literally start with one minute. If this is something that's valuable to you, if it's something you want to try, start where you are, with a minute.

A couple of years later, after I had started teaching yoga and meditation, I got a concussion, which I've talked about in previous episodes. One of the hardest things at that time was, for whatever reason, speaking out loud, so the part of my brain that handled that would go into a tailspin when I would try to lead a yoga class after my concussion or even at home if I was trying to read directions for a new board game. I would immediately feel my brain shut down. I would get headaches, I would have to crash. I would have to go to sleep. That part of my brain for whatever reason must have been what was most deeply damaged from my concussion experience. It has taken me



years to build that back. And probably due in part to that challenge when I transitioned after my concussion back to work, I went back to online teaching in higher ed, which is much more written work than speaking. And my yoga and meditation teaching really fell away.

However, it still absolutely informs the work that I do today. And I still continue my yoga and meditation practice in my own way. Which is to say it is highly variable, and it probably doesn't look like what 90% of yoga and meditation teachers are telling you that you should do. So I want to share that with you in case that holds value for you. To practice yoga and meditation in the way that works for you.

I'll have a couple of weeks or months where I'll get really into a consistent practice, and then I get bored or I get tired or I get injured or I get sick and I stop. What's different for me now though, is that I don't shame myself for stopping. Because remember, right, everything comes and everything goes. So I know it's probably going to come back around at some point. And I just, you know, I enjoy the ride.

I want to share a little bit about meditation that I learned from one of my teachers Marlee grace. Marlee is a teacher who is new to me this year and I so adore their work. Couple months ago, Marlee wrote a newsletter called I DO NOT MEDITATE. It was in all caps. And I immediately was like, Oh my gosh, I have to read this right the second. What I took from their newsletter is that so many of us are walking around with this constant voice in our heads that berates us for all the things we aren't doing or that we aren't doing right. And that meditation is like, high on the list of those things that we aren't doing or aren't doing right that we berate ourselves for. And in this newsletter Marlee was celebrating the, what I took from the newsletter, is that Marlee was celebrating letting go of that voice. And instead of focusing on all the things that we do, and that Marlee does to support their well being and to be present in their life.

Later on, this is the same day the newsletter came out, Marlee came on to Instagram to share that they'd gotten a ton of interesting, thought provoking, feeling provoking responses to that newsletter entitled I DO NOT MEDITATE in all caps, including people readers telling them that they're like, you actually do meditate, you are meditating when you are making quilts or walking your dog. It's a really interesting reaction to tell someone who is joyously and shamelessly celebrating that they don't meditate that they actually are meditating. It's just, it's a really interesting turn. I responded to that



conversation by sharing that my take is that for some people, meditation is the path. And for some people, letting go of shame for not meditating is the path. It's a both/and.

I have absolutely started and continued to rethink meditation since getting diagnosed with ADHD. I've had people who are expert, lifelong, whatever that means, I don't think they were meditating at birth, but for a long time, expert, lifelong meditators who have absolutely no idea about ADHD. No awareness that there might be students in their classes, or in front of them with ADHD. And no idea what that means for meditation. I have been around a lot of those folks in my travels. Something that I have learned is that it is really important to be mindful of what you consume and who you choose to learn from. I no longer sign up for those courses with those teachers. Oh my gosh, how many times that I have I gone to XYZ workshop about how to meditate or how to plan your day with someone who doesn't have ADHD and has no idea what ADHD is or any realization that there's people with ADHD in the room with them. Like how many of those workshops have I invested my time and money in? A lot? I don't do that anymore. Okay, I don't do that anymore. I think it's lovely if that is their path and their practice, and I'm sure that holds a lot of value for many students. But I basically don't have dopamine. I basically don't have dopamine. So it's not, it's not for me, it doesn't hold any value for me and it actually it does harm. The fact that I, with, you know, what's probably a severe case of ADHD, the fact that I am able to close my eyes and find anything that resembles meditation for even a minute is a miracle. And I would say it's the equivalent of a neurotypical brain meditating for like 24 hours, right? So I just, I meditate in my own way. I meditate when I want to. I meditate when it feels right for me. And I, I leave the rest.

I wanted to share the story and these thoughts and these feelings with you all for anyone out there who's ever felt that sense of shame for struggling with meditation. I definitely think there can be value for some ADHDers to learn and practice meditation. Practice being an important word there, right? It's not a destination. It's a lifelong journey of just sitting for a minute or more and noticing what comes up, and I think there can be a lot of value in that for ADHDers, there's been a lot of value in you know, my meditation journey for me. I have learned that as somebody with ADHD, I am probably better suited to a walking meditation. Tons of resources out there about that, or guided meditations, tons of guided meditations out there for you all. Those are probably better options for me. Again, for brief periods of time, then, you know, the 20 minutes twice a



day silent meditation. Just what I have learned, if that helps, check it out, if not go your own way.

I'd also invite people to consider this idea of making a shift from trying to stop your thoughts to starting to observe your thoughts. And to just reject that idea. Again, we don't know who that person is, or persons are, who's telling people that you're supposed to stop your thoughts. We just, we wish them well, but they need to stop telling people that because that message is out there. I don't know where it's coming from. But no one can stop their thoughts. Our brain is a thought factory. Right? So the practice is we observe. And then we gently nudge our, you know, attention back to our breath perhaps or back to our feet if we're walking or back to that guided meditation if we're listening along.

But most importantly, I think what I want to share today is something that I wish someone had told me and would keep telling me maybe every day, which is that whether you choose to meditate or not, I would love for you to consider the idea that maybe what you most need is to reject any pressure you feel to meditate the right way or to meditate at all. And to accept the invitation to do what is right for you and your gorgeous ADHD brain.

Okay, everyone, that is a wrap for Episode Eight. Thank you so much for making the time to listen today. I know that you have a lot of choices about what to give your attention to and it's an honor that you chose me and the ADHD gallery. Your support means the world to me. Please rate the podcast, share it with your friends and colleagues. And of course, make sure to sign up for my email list by visiting theADHDgallery.com Thank you friends.