Standing Up Strong Stacy Sims

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**SPEAKERS**

Dr. Neal Mayerson, Jackie Congedo, Jake Campbell, Stacy Sims

**Jackie Congedo** 00:03

These are your superpowers, positive character strengths. You have them, all of them, some more than others,

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:11

what we are best suited to do in our lives connects with who we are and our character strengths,

**Jackie Congedo** 00:19

standing up strong, activating your superpowers is how you can change the world, and you're pioneering the future of humanity. Let's start right now.

**Jake Campbell** 00:30

Welcome to the upstander ripple effect. I'm Jake Campbell, and I lead upstander training at the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. We're thrilled to have a guest in the studio with us for this episode. Her name is Stacy Sims, and she is the executive director and founder of The Well. Their mission is to improve people's well-being, mental and emotional health. We're going to get some help from her today to understand why mindfulness is so important and how we can create more mindful moment in our daily lives. Stacy, welcome.

**Stacy Sims** 01:03

I'm excited to be here.

**Jake Campbell** 01:04

Oh, I'm excited to have you here, Stacy, so I guess first I'd love to hear about you, what your story is and how you got involved in this incredible work.

**Stacy Sims** 01:13

Thank you so much for asking. So I always, I always have to take a deep breath and pause here, because I'm like, How do I synthesize the life journey of the lived experience? So basically, had lots of natural skills gifted to me in terms of mental, physical agility, a lot of great opportunities as a human being and and despite those things, I ended up in my late 30s on the run from lots of bad habits and lots of responsibility for kind of emotional chaos. And to make that more succinct, by the time I was in my late 30s, I was a daily drinker suffering from panic disorder because I'd so I was so not mindful, and ultimately, the my whole nervous system was in chaos. So I finally got sober, went to a 12 step program and started Pilates in about the same week. And so those two things live together in my mind. So the 12 step work was a way to be able to sort of sit with one's own positive strengths and character deficits, and be able to shed equal light on them, and also listen to people tell stories about resilience, ultimately, and the Pilates is really to me, it's mindfulness In motion. It's moving all the limbs, coordinating the spine, very breath focused, so it allowed me to come back into cohesion. Those two things then allowed me to get out of the very narcissistic state of being dysregulated. And ultimately, it was almost like someone took the blinders off, and I was like, Oh my gosh, other people, and I became very, very interested in the real life challenges that many of us have. We're trying to feel better, but a lot of the tools we're given to feel better actually don't work in a generative way. But when you can find the magic to step into a space of cohesion, the whole world gets more luminous. And that's really what I've been dedicating myself to. Is, how do you figure out what are the what's the secret sauce for helping humans re regulate in a very dysregulated world. And how do we the nonprofit I work with and for, we try to create tools so that mindfulness shows up where people learn, work and live. So it isn't another thing to put on your to do list that you have to do all by yourself. That was a very long answer. Wasn't

**Jake Campbell** 04:28

a long answer all. It was an incredible answer, and it's got me thinking about so many different things, but I think it's getting started with this idea of bringing mindfulness to your work and to the world and helping it so that people can be regulated rather than dysregulated. I would love if you could tell me, like, why you think mindfulness is so important, and also, how do we get to living mindfully?

**Stacy Sims** 04:57

Thank you. So. I didn't really encounter mindfulness. Let me say it this way. I think we are all collectively have encountered mindfulness, hopefully sometime in our life, but I didn't understand it as a codified practice until maybe 10 years ago. But what Pilates, yoga, Reiki, all of those things that I was doing is they started to basically have, as a part of them, an awareness of, basically how your breath is moving in your body, very focused ways of thinking how you're moving energy. Meditation practices and what I discovered is that even before I was on digital devices all the time, like all of us are, that whether it's the world we live in or a little bit of my basic Constitution, that in order for me to get at like a cohesive baseline to be able and by cohesive baseline, what I mean is that I understand that we're going to have difficulties. I understand that we might have injuries, we might have illnesses, but I do think that you humans are uniquely capable of rising to the occasion and overcoming so long as we don't start to perseverate and get stuck. So I think in today's world, you really have to have a mindfulness practice to counterbalance just the noise off of our digital devices, which, by their very nature, are driving us to the base of our brain stem, which is fight, flight, freeze, that's the technology that is in there. So we stay and we profit someone else. So what mindfulness means to me? I understood movement and breath, I understood meditation. But then when I started to really deepen my understanding of what I think in today's world mindfulness is, is essentially having enough practices so that you're able to be focused on the present moment and all the aspects, all the sensory aspects of the present moment I was looking at this glass of water, so rather than just going to chug it, it's just even a sense of like, Oh my gosh. It's so nice and cold, I can feel how the water is condensing on the outside of the glass, thinking of the nourishment that is a mindful moment. You can you can do a mindful walk in nature. We can have a mindful conversation, which we are because we're really attuned to each other, with something between us, which is the topic of mindfulness. You can do mindful eating. Our programs include mindful music moments, mindful poetry moments, using centering prompts to listen to music, centering prompts to listen to poems. But for my money, I think you really need a meditation practice. We need to have time and focus on just our interior responses to the world, and for me, that's the place where I discover strengths as well as thought habits, pettiness habits where you really come to encounter this the most, the beauty and the silliness of your mind.

**Jake Campbell** 08:51

I love so much of that, and I want to talk a little bit about strengths in this idea of being present, in this idea of finding a mindfulness practice, such as meditation. For us, strengths are a tool by which we can be our best wells and be our best selves sorry and also appreciate how the survivors, our survivors and upstanders in our community harnessed their best selves against incredible odds, right? How do you use strengths in your mindful practices at The Well?

**Stacy Sims** 09:31

So what we really try to do is hold space for individuals. What we feel as though, is that if we place or allow invite humans into a mindfulness practice, they're going to naturally be able to unpack the way they think, feel, etc, so it's creating the conditions to be able to discover and amplify what's within. As as the adult facilitators, what we're often doing is help provide different language to help strengthen and fortify especially a young person's understanding of who they are. Everything's become so binary and especially for young people, it's the equivalent of, if there's an uncomfortable feeling, especially socially, the impulse is to just go, "No, swipe. Very good, bad, right, wrong, perform, sleep," not, not a lot in between. So we get to use strengths as sort of like the child who won't quit talking, to be able to say, oh my gosh, I love your curiosity, and I'm so excited about how much you want to know, and I'm eager to figure out if we can find a way to be better listeners and stay curious. So how do you begin to help and a self practice. What we say to adults who we are training to do this work is that wherever we have our deficits, that's where we will be deficit in relationship. So really having a deep and abiding curiosity about one's own strengths and also the things everything we do we do to feel better. So whatever things that are within us that we are not quite happy with, having gentleness about it, but being able to shift versus just sort of spinning around that thing you don't like. So strengths are a way to language and create new revere language, revere ideas, as well as to categorize actions in the positive.

**Jake Campbell** 12:03

I love that idea so much. It's almost like trying. It's one - reframing the negative to move forward with the forward with the positive. But also about is giving the language to the search for balance. All right,

**Stacy Sims** 12:18

yeah, for sure, because we are every cell in our body right now is working on creating some sort of ecosystem balance. And so our thoughts impact the cells. Our cells impact our thoughts. And our framework is kind of holding almost like a globe around us that can either be expansive or can be, you know, make us feel safe and grounded, or it can feel like someone just shook up the snow globe. I met a woman recently who's on only two years in the US after coming to leave the Congo from conflict and then being in a refugee camp for 17 years. Her faith is everything. And I can imagine sometimes with kind of our trauma informed world, or these ideas of, like, really, kind of trying to dig into stuff, or whatever, I feel like, sometimes you just listen to what is the strength of a human being, and know that for them, that is the anchor in the moment. We don't need to dismantle it, if we celebrate it and then create broader experiences around it. I think that humans will naturally fill in to other character strengths and other anchors.

**Jake Campbell** 13:38

Yeah, I was about to say, I was like, that's exactly what it was for me when you were describing it. It sounds like spirituality was for this woman, the anchor that allowed her to persevere and tow up her resilience, and especially when thinking of people's trauma, informed worlds. One of the things that I've always loved about strengths is how part of the inclusion criteria for including a strength is a strength was that when you see somebody perform them, it doesn't make you jealous. It's meant to fill you with admiration.

**Stacy Sims** 14:15

Yeah, and a lot of times we're like, oh, wait, that's someone who means what they say, say what they mean. They're moving into right action. And that's, that's, that's like poetry in motion. It's like dance. And I think collectively, where, whether we're thinking of politics or we're looking, we're looking for people who walk the talk. The other thing, the we, I think we talked about this the last time I got to see you the book The anxious generation, which is a beautiful read for anybody who cares about mental health. But we've also moved away from a monoculture, probably for many good reasons, in some respects, but we have this little these little disparate cultures that come in these little Tiktok bundles or wherever. And I think that. The language of strengths creates enough of a monoculture so that it's not biased towards any one culture it comes out of, as you know, a vast study of what cross culturally are the things that lift up humanity, and if we can all get around those ideas collectively, then we're centering the same thing. And as you said, it's all as it's aspirational and but it's just like watching a mentor. And then if you're studying strengths that then it's it allows you to kind of push the clutter aside and be able to be more in action, as well as receiving of other people's gifts. And that's a community in harmony.

**Jake Campbell** 15:58

Let's talk about harmony, because I think that is so central to this conversation of strengths and mindfulness, and a lot of what you've been talking about as well. You know, I've heard little snippets of it. We've talked about it outside of this, and it's definitely coming up right now is this idea of technology is an obstacle towards harmony. I would love if you could speak on that, because you're so insightful with it, and also any other obstacles you can think about us, being mindful, being present, finding balance, finding harmony. Thank you.

**Stacy Sims** 16:35

Yeah, there's a lot of the book "The Anxious Generation," and a lot of research that's coming out now is just making it not just correlative, but causal, that the technology, in particular social media, and is essentially driving us to the base of the brain by design. So the folks in Silicon Valley spend a lot of money and time understanding what motivates human behavior, and what motivates human behavior, basically to stay online is anything that feels like survival. So essentially, when we're on there, every with the endless scroll, with just looking at 55 tiny little tidbits of information, it's jacking up the nervous system. So it's all sympathetic nervous system arousal that feels like zoning out. But imagine if you it's like the fight or flight part of our nervous system, the alert there is an entire generation who's never not had that there's never been the parasympathetic rest, digest and integrate. If you're online, 60, 70, 80, hours a week, it's just like having chaos or a lion right here, and so it is incredibly toxic, and they're starting, you know, the Surgeon General, lots of individuals are leaning into limiting social media to better would be 16, but at least 13, because it's the mental youth... mental health crisis is extraordinary, and it's not going to get any better. I feel like adults I and I'm kind of the same way, because it's so addicting. And as an addict, I'm very aware of how we can convince ourselves that, well, everybody's doing it, but this is really a moment where we have to all of the polarization that we feel, the speed with which everything is happening. I think we really have to take a look at this. This is going to be like smoking, and understand that is it is impacting our public health, and public health and brain health also affects physical health and emotional health. I work with a lot of teens, and I'm seeing out of 12 teens, half of them with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, POTS syndrome, mobility aids, young people with incredible complex pain syndromes. That's not sustainable. So, and, if we don't have practices, which doesn't have to be meditation, but my guess is you can find something that you like, that you'll do, but if we don't have practices that allow us to be sort of old school, out in nature, walking around, reading books, playing games. If we don't have those practices, we're just going to keep buying the narrative that the technology is selling us. So one thing I heard it one... so I've heard this quote twice. From the guy, Aza [Raskin], who invented the endless scroll. He's mod, he's modified it, but it's still very impactful. He created the endless scroll. The endless scroll waste the equivalent of 100,000 human lifetimes a month, my goodness. So just from human capital, think about all the lost character strengths. That's insane. It's just

**Jake Campbell** 20:36

such a loss from not being present, not just not being present, right, but actively finding a non productive escapism to escape the present. And I'm looking at you right now. And for those that are listening in on the podcast rather than watching YouTube, I can see your badge softly, right? And it like is so antithetical to that idea of trying to soften the noise, because when we are constantly scrolling, we're just bringing up more and more noise, making the noise louder and louder. And I love these tools that you gave that yes, we've got Pilates, yes, we've got Reiki, yes, we've got meditation, even just reading or walking can soften the noise.

**Stacy Sims** 21:30

Yeah. And also, I think that when you soften, you're going to find out more dimensions of yourself and be able to start to kind of piece apart the narrative that we do. As we grow, we try to make sense of things. We're like, Oh, I'm this way. I'm this way. They're that way. So softening allows you to get more dimensional in those thoughts, but it also, I think, will have us understand when we need to fire up and take action. And I think that's the other piece of it, the upstander piece. It's like, we can sit online and be in enraged but I'm pretty sure that tagging some folks is not what is being asked of me as a human, if it could be. But my guess is, my body, my presence, some aspect of myself, wants to be moved out into the world to be useful. So we need both the softness and the fire.

**Jake Campbell** 22:22

I love that the softness and the fire to move us towards action. Upstanders. Now that would, in itself, I think, be a fantastic place to end. But I do have one more question for you, and that is, what do you think is most important? What do you think is most important to find harmony, to find balance, to be mindful and present.

**Stacy Sims** 22:47

Well, I'll say this. I think this comes out of my understanding of being a recovering alcoholic. I feel like if there's the thing that you don't want to deal with, but you probably should deal with do that first, as long as I was not dealing with alcoholism, everything else was sort of folly. And in today's world, it might literally be trying to limit the amount of time you're online, but sort of go for the big thing. Don't ignore it. I would say second, if you think of the prac like practices, it doesn't even have to be Yoga. But if you just did, took a day, or a couple days, and you truly did an inventory of how many hours you're online, how many hours? Like, what did you do that was actually nourishing, like, old school nourishing, like, when you feel your best, like, I laughed with my friend. We all went out, we went a walk in the park. Like, how much are you actually doing that? And I think that if you start placing more of those nourishing activities in, then you're going to find your way toward more ease.

**Jake Campbell** 24:07

I love that so much. And you know, I was just thinking about how much does being in nature makes me admire the world, how much reading and makes me admire the world. And so this is, I think, what I'm going to leave with the most about is, how can I do more that is nourishing my life in the same way as just speaking to you today has 100% nourished my life, and I'm sure that is something that a lot of people say to you. Thank you so much. Stacy.

**Stacy Sims** 24:39

Oh, thank you, Jake.

**Jake Campbell** 24:41

This has been so insightful and so nourishing for my life.

**Stacy Sims** 24:47

Ditto. Thank you.

**Jackie Congedo** 24:48

Our thanks to the Mayerson Family Foundation and the VIA Institute on Character for supporting this series. We have a link in the show notes so you can take your own free character strength survey and learn more about your strengths. We'd love to hear about your experiences with character strengths and how you're using them to stand up. You can reach us anytime by email, and you can listen anytime on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or visit Holocaustandhumanity.org/podcast. You can also connect with us on Instagram and Tiktok @Holocaustandhumanity and x and Facebook @CincyHHC. The Upstander Ripple Effect is a production of the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. This series is part of the Cynthia & Harold Guttman Family Center for Storytelling. Visit us in person at historic union terminal in Cincinnati, Ohio, or online at Holocaust and humanity.org. Managing producer is Anne Thompson. Consulting producer is Joyce Kamen. Technical Producer is Robert Mills. Technical Director is Josh Emerson. Opening sequence is by Ken Furman. Select music is by kick Lee, and this is recorded in Technical Consulting Partner studios in Cincinnati, Ohio.