

IS YOUR INNER CRITIC BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH? • THE RIGHT TIME TO MEDITATE

mindful

healthy mind, healthy life

OPTIMISM IN ACTION

HOW TO BE
POSITIVE...
AND STILL
KEEP IT
REAL

◀ **Alison
Canavan**
Health and
Wellness Coach



MINDFULNESS MADE SIMPLE

*How to find balance
in small moments*

THE ROAD(S) TO HAPPINESS

*The new science
of living well*

CAN MEDITATION CHANGE YOUR BRAIN?

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finding beauty inside

From the outside, former model Alison Canavan's life looked picture-perfect. But her glamorous exterior masked a lifelong struggle with depression.

INTERVIEW BY KELLE WALSH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANIEL HOLFELD

At 15, Dubliner and self-described tomboy **ALISON CANAVAN** was entered into a modeling competition by her mother. It marked the start of a whirlwind career that found her traveling the globe, featured in the pages of international fashion magazines, walking runways for leading designers, and living the high life in cultural hubs like New York City, Paris, and London. But there was a shadow of sadness following her, which had emerged in her teens and haunted her throughout her twenties. And it was made worse by the nonstop partying lifestyle she threw herself into, with alcohol her drug of choice.

When she drank, she says, “I felt free, I felt good, I had confidence, and I had no worries.” Drinking soon became her obsession: when she could drink, how much she could drink, feeling remorse about something she'd done while drinking—that is, when she could remember what had happened. She tried to stop on occasion, including by attending AA meetings, but couldn't admit she belonged there. →

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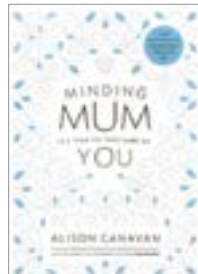
“James was the catalyst, because I wanted to be a better mom.”

As the years wore on, her “lows got lower,” she recalls. She began relying on Xanax “just to leave the house and get on the subway,” and took Valium to sleep. “Whenever I felt an emotion, I swallowed it with a pill,” she says.

A few months after a painful breakup—one that found her returning to Dublin and the comfort of family—she learned she was pregnant. The news finally motivated her to get sober. Soon after she gave birth to James in 2010, though, she fell into a deep postpartum depression. At one point, she was in such a bad state she wasn’t allowed to be alone with the baby. Her doctors wanted to prescribe more drugs, she says, but she resisted because she was breastfeeding. “It wasn’t just about me anymore,” she says. “I had James to think about.”

Over the next few years, she committed to her physical, mental, and emotional health, studied nutrition, and made meditation a daily habit. Her best-selling book, *Minding Mum*, is the result: In it, she explores what self-care really means when you’re a mother, and what she’s discovered about finding health—of both body and mind.

Mindful spoke with Alison about her journey and what it took to get where she is today.



MINDING MUM
**It's Time to Take
Care of You**

By Alison Canavan

In this “new mum’s guide to feeling great inside and out,” Alison shares what early motherhood is really like: being home with baby, postpartum depression, nutritional needs, body image, exercise post-pregnancy—and how to feel great in this new reality. alisoncanavan.com

Mindful: *It may surprise people that even though you’ve had a successful career as a model, you’ve struggled with self-confidence. How is that possible?*

Alison Canavan: I never, ever looked after myself. I never valued myself enough. It’s interesting that you go into an industry to be seen—that’s one thing we all have in common: We all want to be seen, to be validated. However, as a model, you don’t have a voice. You’re “just a model.”

In Minding Mum you write, “I have finally learned to like myself, hell, even love myself... Giving myself permission to do this has made a remarkable difference in my recovery from depression and anxiety.” Can you speak a bit about self-compassion and the role it’s played in helping you get to where you are today?

“Self-compassion” is something I really struggled with. When you start being kind to yourself, it can be uncomfortable. I had never really lis-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Alison and her son, James. Learning she was pregnant, Alison discovered her most compelling reason to recover from substance abuse—and began to love herself for the first time.



tened to or understood the voice in my head. When I became aware of it, and how negative it was, I started to be even harder on myself. I had to start writing things down that I liked about myself, which at first were just things that other people said they liked about me. After I had James, I started feeling my heart opening for myself.

You had been meditating since you were 18, and embarked upon many self-care pursuits through the years. Yet you were still struggling with undiagnosed depression and drinking a lot. What changed?

The partying element was so free and easy in my industry. It was easy self-medicating. And temporarily, it does offer pain relief.

After having my son, I started to wake up. James was the catalyst, because I wanted to be a better mom. But I needed to do it for me. As I went on, I was like, *Hey, I might be worth it.* I was discovering my own value.

The journey over the past few years has been to sit with my emotions, which can be so painful. But it's the only way. Until we start being truthful with ourselves and with everyone around us, we're not going to heal. You can't be talking about depression and be out drinking four or five nights a week. If you want to get better, you have to do the work.

How does the message that alcohol and depression don't mix land in Ireland, a place known for its pub culture?

It's a harsh truth, and one I didn't want to hear for many, many years: If you have mental health problems you are exacerbating those problems if you are drinking. Alcohol is a depressant. I know we'd all love to think we can have a few glasses of wine and it's fine, but it's not.

People are finally agreeing. We do have a big problem with drinking in Ireland, and it's related to mental health. There's a saying: If you want to be lonely, get sober in Ireland. We are not comfortable with people who don't drink.

How are the things you talk about—mindfulness and the idea of a more holistic model of health, facing depression,

dealing with addiction—received there?

Irish people are definitely getting more interested in their health and their well-being. But in America, people are more open. If I post something about addiction, Americans will comment about their own struggles. In Ireland, people private-message me.

Can you say more about this?

We're starting to talk about mental health a lot in Ireland. But I don't think the stigma has been removed. People write to me, saying, "I've been struggling with depression," but there's still a lot of shame, like "Oh, you can't cope." →

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But I think we're moving in the right direction. Listen, there's no plain sailing in this life. But I think the truth sets you free, internally. When I didn't speak my truth, I felt trapped in my own body. Trapped in addiction. But when you speak your truth, you don't feel like you're hiding anymore. It's peace of mind, getting comfortable in your own skin, that gives you some sense of self.

That's something that a meditation practice helps bring you to: It helps you get to know yourself and trust your instincts a little more. I know from personal experience that working with the mind works, and mindfulness is one avenue to do that.

What does this look like in practice?

Start small. You can't say, “I'm going to meditate for an hour a day” when you're just starting out. Start with three minutes, then try five minutes, then work up from there.

I don't think mindfulness is optional anymore. The world is moving too fast. All of our natural mindfulness moments have been taken away from us in the digital world. So we need to consciously create them.

In Minding Mum you discuss your diet, exercise, meditation, and other



Alison and James do a mindfulness practice together at home. You can model meditation for children of any age, Alison advises in Minding Mum. Invite them to try it with you when they get curious.



routines, and offer tips, but also encourage readers to find their own “happy living formula.” What does that mean?

It means figuring out foods that work for you, the right sleep cycle for you, the right exercise, some kind of spiritual practice. And it's going to change, even seasonally. Part of this is also having fun and enjoying the journey. I work with moms who are like, “Oh God, I have to go to the gym,” and I'm like, *Whoa, whoa, whoa, this is your only hour to yourself and you're dreading it?* Find something you love doing.

Authentic self-care is a lot more than food and fitness. In fact, I'd put mindfulness at the top of the list. Until you sit with yourself, you can't know yourself, you can't have self-esteem or take proper care of yourself. Otherwise, you're going to be looking at the outside world to make you feel better.

You also need to show up for yourself most when you *don't* want to show up for yourself. I didn't want to meditate this morning, because I was tired. But I knew if I didn't meditate, didn't write in my gratitude journal, and do some breathing, I wouldn't be able to get through this busy day.

So, would you say that mindfulness is the key to happiness?

Happiness is something I'd be very wary of making the goal; you can't be there all the time. Happiness comes and goes. I think contentment is something you can have. I'm content pretty much every day. I do have bad days—it's just part of the human experience. But I can sit with them and be with them. It doesn't mean that everything is going to fall apart. ●