

**EPISODE 172**

## [INTRODUCTION]

**[0:00:02.6] PF:** Welcome to Live Happy Now. The podcast to inspire you to live a happier life and give you the tools to make it happen. This episode is brought to you by Momentous Institute. Powered by the Salesmanship Club of Dallas and dedicated to building and repairing social, emotional health for kids since 1920.

This is Live Happy Science editor Paula Phelps and today on Episode 172 of Live Happy now, we're talking with New York Times bestselling author, Nick Ortner about his latest book, *My Magic Breath: Finding Calm Through Mindful Breathing*. This book is designed to teach mindfulness skills to children and web editor Chris Libby sat down with Nick to learn more.

## [INTEVIEW]

**[0:00:40.8] CL:** This new book, *My Magic Breath: Finding Calm Through Mindful Breathing*, is aimed at children. What was the inspiration to write this book about this topic specifically targeting younger children?

**[0:00:51.6] NO:** Great question. You know, three years ago, just right about now, a month ago, my daughter June was born so it's my first child then you know, even at when she was a newborn we'd be reading her books and just getting into that whole world of children's books and there's some wonderful stuff out there but I definitely saw some gaps in terms of books that can help kids become the best that they can be. You know, my thinking was, I was reading books, one of the inspirations for this particular book was *Press Here*, which is, if you're not familiar with it, it's the book where the kids are actually interacting with the book.

It's really cute, you know? They press a red dot and they move to the next page, the book was an interactive adventure and I love that book and that thinking and I thought, well, what if we could do that with mindfulness with breathing? Like actually bring it to life. As opposed to a book that talks about the power of the breath for kids, or do we actually get them to use it and have that physical experience while they're reading it at night. That was the inspiration and how the idea started germinating and bubbling around.

**[0:02:01.9] CL:** Just a quick story, because I have a seven year old daughter, myself and when I got this book, I put it into the rotation that time reading with my wife and just to see what the reaction would be, how it would work out and that was what my wife's biggest compliment was, that it was interactive. It was easy for her to do, she felt like she was doing something and it did, it made a difference. Is that essentially what was designed to do?

**[0:02:28.6] NO:** That was, I mean, it makes me so happy to hear it, you know, the book just came out so I'm just starting to get stories, I want to know, right? Because that's what this is about, you know, I wrote the book to hear those stories of people are saying, you know what? While we're reading this book over this five minute period, "My child was just a little bit calmer, my child shared some of the things that were going on in their day."

I mean, that's what some of the feedback that I've gotten already, you know, you know the experience of saying to your child, "How was your day?" Sometimes it's like, "Fine," right? You often don't get that much and also, if you know, your child had something that went wrong that day sometimes, it's hard to get it out of them because they don't know how to express it or they're shy or they're embarrassed or upset.

The book, you know, besides doing the breathing exercises, the book helps open up that line of communication and that's some of the stories, that I've heard from people, that you know, they're reading it at night and when they get to the page about, did something happen today that made you sad or mad then the child starts talking about it it's almost like, the book serves as a counselor between the parent and child. The way to open that door to conversation and bring the breathing in.

That makes me very happy to hear that it's doing what it was intended to do.

**[0:03:47.2] CL:** Yeah, my wife also told me that she would like for my daughter to take it to school so when she gets into those moments because kind of have a feisty seven year old red head. When she gets into those moments, she can pull out the book and go through it and maybe get back to a calm place.

Do you have plans for it to be a tool used in schools?

**[0:04:06.5] NO:** Yeah, 100%. You know, we're getting some great initial feedback from the teachers who have picked it up, it works very easily as an exercise with the whole class. You know, a teacher can read it and again, start opening up that conversation, opening up. I mean, the primary lesson for kids and really for adults too, that's that other fun thing about this is, we're getting adults breathing at night and thinking at night about what went wrong in the day but the primary lesson behind it all is that we are in much greater control of our feelings and our emotions and our experiences than we think we are.

For most of us, I know when - I just turned 40 and I know when I was in elementary school and middle school and high school, there were no tools, I mean, I can't remember a single time where someone said, "If you're upset, do this," right?

It really wasn't until probably after college when I started getting into personal development and self-help and the science of happiness that I realized that I could actually affect what I thought, I could affect the world around me that I could change my reaction to experiences and it seems so obvious to those of us who have made that switch but a lot of people believe if you're angry, it's because there's a reason to be angry and if you're sad, because there's a reason to be sad, it's because something that happened and that's just the way it is.

This book begins to open a conversation at a really young age to the idea that we can do something to change that experience.

**[0:05:34.6] CL:** Can you explain a little bit why learning about the breath and breathing techniques and how to use it effectively is so important, especially for young people?

**[0:05:43.6] NO:** Yeah, absolutely, I mean, look, the breath is available to us at all times, it's something that we do every single day and usually without any conscious thought, that's what's really interesting about the breath that it's done unconsciously 99.9% of the time.

When we bring consciousness to it, when we bring thought to it and it changes that whole experience. The breath, you know, we think about when we get mad or angry, oftentimes, they're shallow breathing when we're upset, they're shallow breathing like we don't open ourselves up.

It's part of our physical system that suffers when we experience these negative emotions and that feedback loop works the other way, when we take a deep breath, we all know that when you take a deep breath, it's relaxing in and of itself.

It's one of the reasons why smokers have such a hard time quitting amongst many reasons obviously, the physical and chemical ones but the psychological ones that you know, when they're smoking, they are stopping for five or 10 or 15 minutes and they're taking a lot of deep breaths, right? They have that ritual in place that says, "Okay, this is the time when I calm down or I'm by myself," or you know, whatever it is, we can establish these kinds of patterns without all the horrible dangers of cigarettes and smoking.

If we can start establishing these habits in kids early on and it's really a training, that's why I think one of the things that's important about the book, one of the things that I hope happens with it is the people read it every single night because the more you do it, the more that the kids are trained in effect to know this is a resource. That means that, you know, if you read it tonight, the kid might have a great experience but then, tomorrow, they're angry and well, they don't think to use their magic breath. But you do that 10 times in a row, you start establishing those patterns and the kids go, "When I'm angry, I can do this, I can blow it out, I can just stop and breathe."

Really, we're trying to condition ourselves in a positive way. Most of us have been conditioned in negative ways to act and to react and as I said before, not think that we're in control of our life experience. This is conditioning that says we are in control when – we can change our physical and thus, emotional states.

**[0:08:04.6] CL:** What are the positive outcomes for mindful breathing, especially for children? Will it improve behavior, grades, that kind of thing?

**[0:08:12.7] NO:** I mean, look, everything, right? I know, it's like, they're the panacea and it seems like too good to be true but improved behavior, 100%. You know, can we stop on angry response, focus, test taking. Like, we tend to think that school is cool and the home life is the home life and we don't pay any attention to our kid's emotional lives and you want to improve

test results, put some time into helping kids calm down, feel at ease in their body, let go of negative emotions. That's when they're going to be able to learn.

You know, when we think about learning and that's the point of school, right? The primary focus, so I obviously think there should be other focuses but if we're learning math and science, if a kid comes into school stressed out, what happens when we're stressed? As kids or as adults, we enter the fight or flight response, the blood flows away from our forebrain into our arms and legs because our innate native, ancient system thinks that we're under attack.

If a kid's mad about something, if his parents yelled at him in the morning, if he's upset about something, his friends said, he is stressed. When he's stressed, when she is stressed, they aren't thinking clearly. I mean, literally, don't have the blood in their brain to think clearly and then learning goes completely out the window.

We know this is as adults, like, if we're angry about something, you know, you ever tried to do any work when you're angry about something? You ever tried to be productive when you're angry about something? It's literally impossible, right? It's like –

**[0:09:46.7] CL:** Yeah, it's hard to get anything done.

**[0:09:49.2] NO:** It's hard to get anything done, right? If we want to improve our kid's test scores and their learning, we need to focus on them being calm and relaxed and this is a tool to lead them in that direction.

**[0:10:02.2] CL:** I'm glad you brought up stress because I think, sometimes, and actually, this is not my opinion, I was just reading a recent study about this, about - that parents are almost oblivious to stress in young kids and they feel like they're not paying attention or being intentional or don't understand or don't feel like what is my child have to be stressed about.

But, our children are stressed and what are some things that parents can look out for to – what are some signs of a stressed out kid?

**[0:10:31.1] NO:** Yeah, such a great point and you know, look, you can see as parents, we probably look at our kids and go, "Come on," you know? "You don't have any bills to pay, it's

like, you don't have a job to worry about, you don't have a career, what could you possibly be stressed about? You play all day," you know?

We all think back to, boy, wouldn't it be nice to be in elementary school or even be in high school, how easy was life then? I understand where that thinking comes from but you're right, our kids are stressed. Here are the signs, behavior problems, learning problems, bad grades, anything where you go, "My gosh, I'm upset that my child isn't doing that or is doing X."

Look more deeply and you're going to find stress at the root cause of it. You're going to find that they're upset about something, they're overwhelmed about something, they're unhappy about something. You know, there's nothing wrong with our kids, when there's behavior problems, there's usually an underlying thing that is causing that. Yeah, just starting to notice that and saying to yourself, "Is my child stressed and what can I do?"

The little things, the breathing, the pause and to reduce that stress. I think that's how we fix those "problems."

**[0:11:45.4] CL:** It seems like our kids are also plagued today with distraction. Do you feel that mindfulness for children is more important than ever today? And why?

**[0:11:55.1] NO:** 100%. I mean, we're all plagued with distraction as we well know. I can't - not being a child in this era, I can't imagine what that experience is like for them. You know I keep thinking back to high school and look, high school was tough enough and middle school was tough enough and now you see social media in the mix? Like my gosh, I can't imagine being on social media and you know, you see kids as young as middle school on it and seeing that all your friends got together to do something and you weren't invited.

At least we had the ignorance when we were in middle school but yeah, things are coming at kids so quickly, in so many different directions and there is so much distraction that we just frankly need better tools and it has become more important than ever. You know, maybe when I was in elementary school I would go and play out in the woods for four hours and that was meditative and relaxing in it of itself. We didn't have to have this concrete practice.

But that is not the case for kids now so I think like I said more important than ever to help bring these tools in so they can change their experience of life.

**[0:13:03.6] CL:** So *My Magic Breath*, at what age is it designed for? And design is a good word because actually the illustrations are really nice in this book, was there a thought process into getting the right illustration for this book?

**[0:13:16.3] NO:** Yeah, I mean I think that was really important to me. It was actually illustrated by one of my best friend's wives and she's incredible and we worked through a lot of iterations to bring the color to life. You know it is kind of interesting, how do you bring up breath to life and I think the illustrations do a nice job of showing that movement. So that was important.

The age range, you know so my daughter is three right now and we read it at night. And she does the inhaling and exhaling and she has fun blowing out on the page. When I asked her if she had a sad thought that day or read that part, she's not quite connecting with that yet though I am seeing signs of it and I think it is important to do it then, right? So even if every single page on the book isn't geared for a three year old, they can still begin that practice and make it something that they look forward to and then I think it really shines when you're talking to five, six, seven, eight, nine year olds.

My nephew is nine and he loves it and it's fun and simple but it opens up a conversation. So look, I am sure some high school kids can read it and gain something. One of the things that I hope happens, as I mentioned earlier, is that the parents take this time. You know we tend to be so outward focused and we think, "Okay we got to fix our kid," or there's this wrong or that wrong with our kids and our parental energy has such an influence on our kids.

If we are stressed, they're stressed, end of story. They just pick it up, it's just the way it goes. I am sure you've noticed that yourself, like how much your energy and your attitude has an effect on your daughter.

So if we're taking those deep breaths at night and opening ourselves up to these thoughts and ideas and being more mindful then that's going to help our kids.

**[0:15:05.4] CL:** Yeah, that's great. This has been great. The book, *My Magic Breath: Finding Calm Through Mindful Breathing*, I assume it's available now in all bookstores and Amazon and stuff like that?

**[0:15:14.2] NO:** Available now everywhere, yep, absolutely.

**[0:15:16.7] CL:** I think you hit the nail on the head when you said it opens up the communication. I think in my opinion, sometimes when you're parenting that can get lost because lives are busy and anything to get back to communicating with your child and having another tool to do that is great. I urge everybody to check out *My Magic Breath*. It's great and it's fun. Thanks for joining us today.

**[0:15:37.7] NO:** Thanks so much for having me.

**[0:15:39.1] CL:** All right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[0:15:44.1] PF:** That was Nick Ortner, author of the children's book, *My Magic Breath: Finding Calm Through Mindful Breathing*. We'll be back in just a few minutes to tell you how you can learn more about this book but first, we are introducing a segment called On a Happy Note. It's designed to introduce our listeners to musicians who are using music to make the world a happier place.

Today we are talking to Daphne Willis, a Nashville based recording artist who is using music big as her platform to talk about mental health issues.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:16:10.3] PF:** One of the things that make your music so unique is that you write about mental health issues but you do it in this brilliant powering way. Can you talk about what made you go down that path?

**[0:16:19.8] DW:** Sure, I mean I have battled with mental health issues pretty much my entire life. I've also got family members that battle with things like that. I think that the more people that I talk to the more I realize that everybody has, you know, if they're not themselves battling something or dealing with some kind of mental health issue, they know somebody who is or there is somebody in their family who struggles and so that to me is such a human aspect.

It is just part of the human experience to me and those are the kinds of things that I think I gravitate toward in what I listen to and what I listen to when I am listening to music for motivation or for working out and so these topics I think are just very important to include in music. So I try and do that.

**[0:17:12.4] PF:** Well there is a certain boldness too in being able to say, "I have mental health issues, I have struggled with depression or I have anxiety," there's a real boldness. You know, its one thing to acknowledge it to yourself but to really put it out there and all art is vulnerability but was that intimidating at first or has it been really natural to you to be able to do that?

**[0:17:33.3] DW:** Yeah and it's taken me a while too, you know? I have always been a mental health advocate but I haven't really publicly released music that has really dove really far into the subject because like you said, it's vulnerability and I think it takes time.

I think you have to be comfortable with yourself when it's taken me a long time with the stuff that I've been going through to even get to the place where you and I are having this conversation right now, you know?

It just takes time and work and you know I think the more work I do, the better I feel. Also, I released a song in February called Somebody Someone and that was a huge, kind of, eye opening experience for me and that that was the first song that I really released that I was really dedicated to that cause, to the cause of mental health and it was a really vulnerable moment but it was also the floodgate that opened. It was completely overwhelming.

I had no idea that people were going to respond that way and it was for me, it was a really vulnerable naked moment for me. So I was like, I put literary freaking out and when I pushed the button to post it all up in the internet and just put it out there and then literarally within a month, it

was up to five million views and we kept getting all these stories from people who were connecting with the message and wanting to share their story.

So we ended up making a support group for some of the fans that really wanted to connect with one another. So it's turned into such a beautiful thing both for me and I think for the new fans and people who have been introduced to that song.

**[0:19:24.0] PF:** It's like your music has become this mission that has a life of its own and it's taken on its own identity almost.

**[0:19:31.1] DW:** It does and it's turned - you know for me it's taken me to the place where I view it more as it's almost like it's a part of me but it's also for me. I benefit directly from - it's basically changed the way that I look at releasing music to being this platform for me to release my own feelings and my own kind of stuff into the world and it's helped me grow in ways that I never imagined it would and it's also strange because I am more connected to it but I am also disconnected from it as well, in that I almost feel like it's just given me such a purpose as an artists.

I really feel like I've connected with a purpose and that it's not just for me, you know? It's for all of these other people too.

**[0:20:19.6] PF:** Yeah, so even though it is personal it belongs to everyone.

**[0:20:21.8] DW:** Right. It is more like the music is a vessel for different things, you know?

**[0:20:27.4] PF:** Well one thing that is so exceptional about your work is that you approach these tough issues but the song feels really upbeat, you know? We are not listening to 90s grunge. It is a really upbeat kind of feel to it and you actually feel good as you are listening to the song about depression or mental illness. And so how are you able to do that?

**[0:20:49.4] DW:** Well I think for me and that's the whole point, you know for me is that all these things have such a dark shadow cast on them and certainly I think we all can agree that there's just this mass of stigma surrounding those issues in general.

So to me, it's been the most helpful for me when I am thinking about these things, when I am working on them in therapy, whenever I am out and about in the world to just be positive and the power of positive thinking is tremendous.

So I am trying to always be implementing that into these subjects because while they are difficult and often sad and heartbreaking, it's part of life. It's part of the human experience and if you want to overcome them, you need to maintain a positive mindset.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[0:21:42.8] PF:** That's all for this episode of Live Happy Now. Be sure to visit us at [livehappynow.com](http://livehappynow.com) to learn more about today's guests, Nick Ortner and Daphne Willis.

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Special thanks today to the Momentous Institute for bringing us this episode of Live Happy Now. Momentous Institute 7th Annual Changing the Odds Conference will be held on September 27th and 28th at Omni Dallas Hotel. Visit [momentousinstitute.org](http://momentousinstitute.org) to register and find out more about the panel of education and mental health experts you can enjoy at that conference.

That is all we have time for today, so please join us back here next week and until then, remember to make every day a happy one.

[END]