

# Well-Being in Higher Education

**Kate Mulligan, PhD**, Teaching Professor, Neuroscience and Human Anatomy, Associate Director, Center for Learning and Innovation in Medical Education (CLIME)

**Anne Browning, PhD**, UW School of Medicine, Associate Dean for Well-Being

**Megan Kennedy, MA, LMHC**, Director, UW Resilience Lab

## [Intro Music]

**Amanda Garza:** Welcome to CLIMEcast! I am Amanda Garza the CLIME Program Manager, and I am excited to introduce you to this episode on Wellbeing in Higher Education. In this episode our CLIMEcast host and Associate Director Kate Mulligan talks with Anne Browning and Megan Kennedy about the importance of centering student well-being in higher education, and specifically in our health sciences educational programs.

Dr. Browning is the Associate Dean for Well-Being at the University of Washington School of Medicine, she is the Founding Director of the UW Resilience Lab and serves as an Affiliate Assistant Professor at the University of Washington College of Education. Her focus at UW School of Medicine is well-being and resilience programming to meet the emerging needs of our healthcare team members and communities

Megan Kennedy is the current Director of the University of Washington Resilience Lab. Her work aims to develop and evaluate systems-based approaches to well-being that combine applied research, education, and collaborative programming.

Both our guests are committed to building healthy and compassionate learning communities, and we hope you enjoy the discussion.

**Kate Mulligan:** So, welcome Anne and Megan and thank you so much for joining me. Let's start with each of you sharing a little bit about your journey into this work and how you got to where you are now, Anne do you want to start?

**Anne Browning:** Sure. Well, I guess I've, in a way of kind of stumbled into this work within this kind of well-being space as someone who really entered into higher education, looking at students pathways, kind of into and through institutions and trying to understand what were the factors that were helping some folks thrive and for others to, to kind of hit walls and pivot away from their interests and trying to make sure that, that we as higher ed institutions were paying attention to who was able to thrive and who was, who was struggling in different spaces and really trying to take some different approaches, to supporting students. I came into this work within the University of Washington, working with student athletes originally, and then, started and built out academic support programs and ultimately then had a chance to kind of work in the space of developing the UW Resilience Lab in collaboration with a ton of faculty and staff across our campuses and it was interesting, I think the, the challenges that were emerging around wellbeing and resilience were existing in health and healthcare for a long time. And so as, as I was building out and working with folks across the university, more and more folks from healthcare started to kind of call in and be interested in having some conversations around resilience and wellbeing that have now kind of led me into this work, but I would say my broader approach has been around trying to understand systems, so not just kind of individual levels of resilience and wellbeing, but kind of understanding how we interact with each other in community and how we either kind of thrive or, struggle as ecosystems. So, very much a, a broader approach than the individual to look at what our systems constraints and how they impact all of us in terms of what we can do and what are the limitations to how we can kind of grow and thrive within spaces.

**Kate Mulligan:** I'm personally very glad that you're here and doing that, that's a huge need. Megan, what about you?

**Megan Kennedy:** Well, I started working at the University of Washington in 2016 and prior to 2016, I spent a little over a decade as a youth and family therapist at a community-based organization in the King County region.

In that work as a therapist, I spent a lot of time specifically providing individual and family counseling to LGBTQ young people and their families. And over time I think speaking to systems, as Anne already brought into the conversation, it became really apparent that beyond the individual struggles that young people were facing it was the systems and structures in their lives, like systems of oppression that were creating, the stress that they were trying to cope with

effectively. So, I became just interested in that relationship between how the systems and structures that we exist in, impact our stress and our resilience to stress and our mental health. So began to examine that ecosystem as Anne is calling it.

I came over to the University at Washington then to think about systems level interventions to suicide prevention. I worked in a position that was the manager of strategic initiatives for student wellness, where I was kind of able to sit at this balcony perspective and look at the college writ large and think about where there might be different systems level opportunities for us to be better aligned more on the same page, working toward common outcomes where there might be gaps in the ways that we were trying to support students. How the way really the system was working together might be interfering with not meeting the outcomes that we were desiring and it's in that position that I met Anne and we began to collaborate and really think about, how do we engage the whole system in taking responsibility for creating a compassionate university? And that includes staff and that includes instructors, and that includes the ways that we create, like cultures of belonging. The way that we work together strategically. In the way that we, think about, what types of communities to focus on so we'll talk more about that we'll get into those details, but that's how I came into the work. And then in 2018, I became the interim director of the Resilience Lab when Anne shifted over to the School of Medicine and, have been directing the resilience lab ever since.

**Kate Mulligan:** Great, thank you! I'm really interested to hear about your systems level work, although my interaction with both of you has been more from the faculty level, like what can faculty do to help and that's something we'd love to expand on, but before we do, could you maybe talk a little bit more about what the University of Washington Resilience Lab is or what the proud moments proud products of it might be?

**Anne Browning:** The lab came out of some research I was doing for my dissertation within our College of Education. And again, really looking at student athletes and really folks who are struggling with their transition into and through the university, writ large, and within this area of focus, really seeing kind of what were these, these struggle points that students were facing specifically in an academic domain where, when things got really, really challenging and they were kind of push the edge of their own, current level of competency. We saw this systematic way in which students were withdrawing

effort from an academic domain, as kind of an ego protection mechanism. And like it's easier to not try hard at something and fall short, than it is to really put in your best effort and still be found wanting.

So, as an educator to see students, almost, subconsciously yet kind of intentionally withdrawing effort from an academic domain it's like the opposite of what we wanted to be seeing. And really when it, we kind of dug into this, we're like, is this really around kind of resilience coping? What is happening here? We reached out to our, our friends in student life and housing and food services across campus in different departments and it really became this group of faculty and staff that started to come together and was almost the snowball effect of people who were, like, were seeing something around kind of students facing challenges and not necessarily, having good coping skills to, to meet those challenges and move through them that really seeded the work of the Resilience Lab. I would say it was both a challenge and I think it ended up being probably one of the most fortunate pieces of the work is though we didn't have, much funding out of the gates. What we did have was a lot of people who are just like deeply invested in figuring out how to better support students and their pathways, and so what happened was instead of being able to do a lot of new big splashy programming, everybody around the lab was like, How do I take these principles around kind of at the time resilience, and now certainly we've got involved into, you know, wellbeing more broadly, but how do we take this and infuse it into the work we're already doing, the programming we're already doing? So, it became kind of this way stitching resilience and resilience coping into kind of the fabric of the programs across our system, and that actually led to kind of a culture shift in a much faster way than I think if we had been an individual office doing a lot of individual programming.

You know what was amazing is in working with faculty and staff across campus, the deep collaborations that came out of this work with the resilience, have led us in some really new and interesting directions. One of the most profound collaborations I had was with Megan, who kind of emailed me to say like, "Hey, have you seen this Engelhard project from Georgetown University?"

And really looking at, how do we support faculty in integrating wellbeing into their classroom structures and into their curriculum? That led to an incredible collaborative rabbit hole that, that took us to Washington, DC and I'll hand it off to Megan to share more of the story from there

**Megan Kennedy:** So the Engelhard Project is an initiative out of Georgetown. It's existed for over a decade it's just such a cool example of how a university is, based on their value system, their specifically at Georgetown Jesuit Value System, and specifically their value of care, personalist or care for the whole person, how they are taking that value and actualizing it within the college.

And they do it by, engaging with professors in thinking about like, as a professor, how can I create a classroom environment that is advocating for student mental health and wellbeing in ways that like fit really naturally within the course and the context that I'm teaching. And so one of the like examples that has stuck with me, since Anne and I visited Georgetown and that was, that was what was in 2018, is we met a professor of applied math, teaching in the math department he had been there for a long time, but the focus of like his story problem, so to speak, was on things like gambling, blood alcohol content or nutrition. Things that are important pieces wellness education for college students to receive.

And so, he was able to stitch it together like just so seamlessly. And so we came back to the University of Washington, Anne and I, after having conversations at Georgetown with the Engelhard Program lead with professors engaged with staff, engaged with students, um, and with their researchers. And we asked ourselves like, what is the role for caring for the whole person or the whole student within a public research university context? And because Anne had really just mobilized such a committed group of staff and faculty and students from across our large campus communities, meaning like not just UW Seattle, but our other campus and greater region of University of Washington.

We're able to bring that question, back to the community and then go through the process of co-designing one of the labs current, like signature initiatives, which is the Wellbeing for Life and Learning Initiative. In, in essence, the Wellbeing for Life and Learning Initiative is, is, is inviting faculty into that work, into thinking about how do they create a classroom environment that supports the whole student. This isn't a one size fits all type of initiative, but we can create, opportunities for instructors to come together through community of practice model and be in conversation about like, A, what does that mean and B, then how do you do it like in practice. The framework that this community of instructors who engaged with the initiative early on, came up with is this notion that to create a classroom environment that promotes wellbeing, you have to be thinking about it in these four kind of categories, one, First and foremost, just thinking about, the relationship between wellbeing and racial

justice and creating classroom environments that are inclusive, that are safe, that promote a sense of belonging, that interrupt microaggressions, that disrupt discrimination, all of it, right?

And that's like at the top. If students don't feel a sense of belonging, then they're not gonna feel a sense of wellbeing. Secondly, and connected is focusing on just that sense of connection that students feel to each other, to the university, to the topic, to the professor. Just connection generally and cause we know of the strong connection between having a sense of connection in our wellbeing. So those are the first two parts of the model. The third part has to do with more classic resilience coping strategies. Things like how factors like our self-compassion, mindfulness, gratitude, growth mindset, those types of skills and mindsets help us, in the ways in which, professors can nurture concepts like growth mindset in the way that they teach.

And then finally, we've been thinking a lot about, well, zooming out, what's the relationship between the classroom environment, both the internal classroom, physical environment and the external environment, like our natural world in promoting student mental and wellbeing. And how can professors utilize what we know about how that relationship matters better. So, we have lots of faculty contribute lots of ideas about how they're bringing students outside or how they're bringing the outside indoors. How they're really attending to the natural environment of their classroom, and things like that. And so all of this information was published into our guidebook, which is available online, and in print version.

Then we like to engage faculty we have a tri-campus community of practice that's been meeting on a monthly basis for several years now, to talk about these types of issues. And then we do interdepartment communities of practice for academic departments interested in thinking through these ideas collectively. And so last fall as an example, when we brought the community a practice model to the School of Medicine and engaged the whole WWAMI region in the Wellbeing for Life and Learning Initiative. I think the cool thing about the initiative is that it has an impact on both individual instructors and thinking about their individual pedagogies.

But it also has an opportunity for then instructors to talk across, departments with each other about, well, what are some of the challenges that we're facing collectively are more culturally that we need to attend to as well, or bring to leadership. And so it opens up the conversation for folks to distinguish

between like, what's my individual responsibility as a professor and what do we need to push on together as a system?

So I'll pause there, but that's, that's that initiative. One example of like the resilience lab, focus and kind of the type of impact we're trying to make at the UDub and beyond.

**Kate Mulligan:** Great thank you. It's interesting to hear you talk and the timing of this, and you realize that, if ever you were going to construct some scenario that proved the worth of what you're doing, the pandemic would be the, would be the thing.

And that's, I'm so glad that you were able to launch before that, and I'm sure there were there are instances during the pandemic where people benefited from having the guidebook and for, from applying some of the principles that you're, that you've been working on. So thank you.

Anne can you tell us a little bit more about the wellbeing initiative in School of Medicine?

**Anne Browning:** Medicine writ large, we've had a challenge in terms of how both our, our faculty, our staff, our trainees, our learners are experiencing practicing medicine. To me I think it, it provided a really interesting kind of evolution of the work that we were doing with the Resilience Lab, and the Wellbeing for Life and Learning initiative to think about what would that look like within medicine. As luck would have it, the school really chose to invest in having an assistant dean for wellbeing, in about 2019 and I was able to apply for, and, and get that job, when I started that summer, roughly six months before the pandemic hit. So it was trial by fire and then some. In terms of thinking about what does it mean to try to be well in the midst of a pandemic, how do we take care of people?

What, what resources are we providing folks on an individual level? How do we think about our collective wellbeing? But overall, I would say, these positions around kind of supporting wellbeing within medicine are something that are kind of an emerging national trend, as we are seeing really big increases, especially over the last 12 months with the chronic stress of the pandemic hitting a lot of our providers, and we're seeing increases in burnout and decreases in professional fulfillment. So I think there's kind of a national movement now. In some ways, I wouldn't say that we were aware early

adopters, but we certainly in terms of being able to connect into our broader campus resources and having this kind of broader academic community thinking about wellbeing.

I think that is something that actually has set us apart, is this, this connection to kind of a greater set of thinking around kind of wellbeing. So, you know, for instance, we've now run, Wellbeing for Life on Learning kind of community practice with faculty, and that is open to folks across our WWAMI region.

And these resources are not just for our Seattle based teams, but really in, in terms of wanting to support anyone who's affiliated with UW medicine and the School of Medicine broadly.

**Kate Mulligan:** And just put a plug in for the resilience lab too, as faculty affiliated with the University of Washington even if you're in far reaches of WWAMI land, the resilience lab is there for you as well. And, I'm really grateful for that. We've been sort of accepting the idea that wellbeing and resilience are important in higher education. And I know some of our listeners will be really invested and fully behind that. But for anyone who's a little bit skeptical out there, could you maybe tell us about how wellbeing and resilience is really important in higher education and medical education especially.

**Megan Kennedy:** Let me start, just talking about, the value of focusing on mental health and wellbeing in higher education more generally. And then, and perhaps you could talk more about specifics to the school of medicine. I think at this point it's fairly understood that, and often referred to as like a mental health crisis on college campuses. So, and that for some people it may be understood that like the pandemic just really exposed that. And other people would say that the pandemic turned what was bad already to worse. So, perhaps both are true. We also know that on college campuses, it's pretty ubiquitous that, the counseling centers that exist on the majority of college campuses, universities across the country are overburdened overtaxed and that they're really meant to be there as a really valuable, resource for students, but alone can't address the magnitude that we're seeing. And so there's been a real need to think about different types of interventions to one, support student mental health. If we Zoom out and take a more systems perspective, as a family therapist, I often think about like, bring your child into therapy and I'll do my best to support the child.



But really, let's put the child in the waiting room and let's talk to the parents and really support and put up their skills and wellbeing first. And that should have pretty great impact on the child. And so the same kind of theory holds true in higher ed, where if we also focus on staff and instructors, we should be able to change the culture overall.

Other things we know about wellbeing in higher ed, you know, reasons that it matters. Or because like at the UDub, for example, we know that wellbeing is one of the leading reasons that students leave the university. So according to our retention studies that we've, hold periodically wellbeing is always showing up as one of those reasons that students are leaving.

We also know that like mental health is in and monolithic experience and that different types of students have different types of mental health issue that they're dealing with through their university experience. And if we think about students of color specifically, the mental health issues that they're struggling with often have to deal with the social environment or the culture or the climate of the university and so they'll often rate the culture of the climate of the university on a climate study, for example, is fairly low and not supportive. And their mental health issues are commonly having to do with things like imposter syndrome, coping with experiences of discrimination, microaggressions, feelings of isolation, things like that.

And so, it gives us, really good reason if we think here we are as a university with an investment in our DEI or diversity and equity and inclusion initiatives. And we also know that wellbeing matters. But, but truly like these issues are, are really interconnected and really interlocked. And to the degree that we can improve our culture or climate and create institutions that are more focused on racial justice, we're also going to be moving the needle on our wellbeing outcomes as well. Anne can hone in more on how it relates to medicine more specifically.

**Anne Browning:** Sure, and I'll start even by coming back to that concept of the ecosystem, and I think a lot of the work, even thinking originally about the lab was, "Gosh, how do we take better care of our learners and our students?", and you know, as Megan was kind of giving that analogy of in, supporting a family, really talking to the parents about how to then improve the life of the kiddo. It's similar within higher ed and within medicine. If we want to see any part of an ecosystem thrive, we really have to kind of be thinking very holistically.

And so, a lot of that has been beyond the students, how are we taking care of faculty and staff at a university? And when we expand into medicine, to me I think there's this really complex new layer of the system that we're thinking about in that our healthcare teams are really there to support the, health and wellbeing of our community. And that becomes like a really powerful thing when we want our community to be healthy. And then we draw back to, okay, what is the provider's experience? How are they able to show up at work? How do we hope take care of them so that they can do really excellent care of the members of our community.

And within that, like how are the teams working across, providers, fellows, residents or nursing teams or med students? Like how are these teams actually working and how does each piece of the puzzle come into play in terms of kind of the overall impact on our community health. So, to me this kind of idea of wellbeing within healthcare we are in a really dangerous space right now. For a long time healthcare to make this system work with, especially within the United States we have leaned more and more into our providers to spend more time with patients, but then more time in electronic health records, more time kind of navigating the system, and that we've leaned into that provider's time and their wellbeing to a huge extent. And we're kind of at this breaking point. And I think especially now that we are, what I would say is, beyond the scary point of the pandemic. We are seeing actually a pretty strong exodus within our nursing staff. And I think that will also then, if we are not incredibly urgent in how we are showing up for wellbeing, show up in our physician provider spaces as well.

In terms of folks just wanting to have better work life integration. And our systems are not set up for that right now. So trying to kind of figure out, what would that look like, if we think about it from a learner perspective. Within this learning environment space was one of the big problems with the medicine is we have been training people in the same system that replicates a lot of these issues that we see in terms of, training folks to thrive under exhausted and often burned out, ways of showing up in the world. And in a way, we are trying to teach our, our medical students to push back and change the system, but then we aren't changing the systems they're entering into. And that sets them up for really hard moments of transition.

So really thinking about how do we. How do we train our med students to, to kind of push back? How do we support our trainees and residents, and then how do we help our faculty realize you don't have to run the same gauntlet I

did to learn how to be a good physician? And that I think is probably one of the biggest challenges, is accepting that there are other ways of becoming a really good physician.

And then, you know, working 120 hours a week. So, huge, huge challenges to try and get folks to think about the system differently, but we need to do that and kind of play the long game in order to try to find some more balance within healthcare and honestly, push back on some of the systems that have been pushing our providers to just do more and more and more with less and less and less.

**Kate Mulligan:** I don't think the word toxic is a, is an exaggeration. This idea that you just tough it out and you know, suck it up and keep on moving forward. And even in my lifetime in education, in medical education, I've sort of seen a bit of a change in that. But you do confront that.

**Anne Browning:** You know, I think, I think there is within medicine, this, this sense martyrdom. And you know, Megan and I both looked quite a bit at self-compassion as a metric, that that shows us how folks can be kind to themselves when you know, big challenges, failures, hard things happen. How they can stay emotionally engaged through that process, how they can see those challenges as part of kind of, a collective experience in common humanity.

And within the United States, our healthcare teams tend to be very bad at practicing self-compassion. We have the sense that we're supposed to perform at a certain level, without making mistakes. And we are incredibly hard on ourselves when we do. And yet that is a factor that that comes into play that actually keeps us from having positive developmental trajectories from kind of bouncing back from the hardship and being able to reengage and do good work again.

So there, there's some challenges that exist within the system based on who we've selected for and then how we have trained them to, to operate that, that we wanna kind of challenge in doing work like this Wellbeing for Life and Learning initiative.

**Kate Mulligan:** Anne, what you are talking about with training our students to be mindful and proactive about wellbeing and healthcare, mental healthcare.

Then asking them to push against the system as they go through it, I hadn't appreciated how that could be dangerous.

**Anne Browning:** Yeah, I think we do have to be thoughtful about, you know, how we are supporting our students to challenge systems, but also help them understand what are the systems they're going to be entering into. I think about kind of individual level resilience and wellbeing. It's not a Band-Aid that we want people to put on so that they can survive the structures that exist.

It's really how do I maintain my own sense of wellbeing and a wholeness in myself while challenging the systems, and staying engaged in that incredibly hard work, whether, it's around racial justice, gender equality, health equity, like these are all huge systems issues that we have and as many of us need to stay engaged in those efforts of change as possible. And part of that comes with doing work around resilience and wellbeing for ourselves that ultimately help our community.

**Kate Mulligan:** Let's get back to the learning environment say in the School of Medicine or in the health professions education arena, what would you say might be different for today's learners in terms of stressors and challenges to their wellness and wellbeing?

**Anne Browning:** I can start by saying I think we've seen across the board over the last two and a half years a level of both acute stressors relative to the pandemic and chronic stress in terms of existing and trying to learn and perform and, and be in the world relative to kind of the pandemic challenges.

I, I know early on there was just like an incredible sense of uncertainty and with that it carries a tremendous amount of stress and for our learners there's this constant sense of, am I falling behind? Will I be ready for residency as a resident? Am I falling behind? Have I seen enough procedures? Am I going to be ready to move on?

And so I think there, there has been, that am I able to do the work I need to do to move forward? And then, and I might have Megan speak a little more to this as it as is something that shows up in both of our worlds. But then there's kind of this social aspect that I think has had a tremendous amount of stress in terms of, now I'll say how I've seen it in medical education, we have residents showing up and unable to meet or connect or find community. Over the last two and a half years, we've had new faculty starting, et cetera. And what does

it mean in terms of stress and not having those social connections and relationships, which are one of the prime factors of, resilience. Megan, what have you been seeing on campus in terms of stressors as well for learners?

**Megan Kennedy:** I'll pick up where you left off just to corroborate that, the slow return to campus over the last year the need to nurture connection is greater than ever.

And I think that what I would wanna add to that is connecting to the earlier point around the parallel process that staff and instructors are going through. So not only are we needing to nurture the sense of connection among students, but to the degree that we can and we being, in this case, for me, the Resilience Lab can think about ways to nurture connections between staff and instructors.

That's also helping with that greater sense of connection or at least we hypothesize that'll help with the greater sense of connection that students experience too. So, at very basic levels the resilience lab is thinking about, How do we get people together in social contexts right now, staff and instructors to like rebuild our community?

We're going back to the brass tax, and it may seem simple, but in the ways that we know that nurturing connection is connected to our greater sense of wellbeing and also probably related to, people's connection to the university and therefore retention and job satisfaction It all really matters. Other issues that I think we're aware of that folks are experiencing are these issues that are just very existential. A, multi-year global pandemic, racial trauma, climate anxiety, economic issues. Those have real impacts on people's psyches and real lived experiences and the real stressors that they're experiencing.

**Anne Browning:** There's plenty of stress, I think the pandemic has been a big piece of the puzzle, but we also didn't enter the pandemic on equal footing for some of us were relatively thriving and the pandemic shows up and knocks us off our feet a little bit, maybe a lot however, some folks, are existing within, systemic oppression and then the pandemic hits. So there's kind of a differential impact based on who you are, identities you hold, ways in which you move through the world. And I think it's a really good point that then, of course, over the last two and a half years have just been layers and layers of challenges from, you know, climate change to social unrest, to, racial violence

and it layers and adds to the, the chronic stress that, you know, people are experiencing right now.

**Kate Mulligan:** So getting it back to some techniques, could you again summarize for us what techniques we might be able to encourage in our learners that would help them build resilience and more coping skills?

**Megan Kennedy:** The resilience Lab has been focusing on different interventions that are aimed at shifting the culture or changing the system. We're also really focused on supporting individual stress coping, and so one of our core programs that we lead, is called Be Real.

And this was a program that was developed by the Center for Child and Family Well-Being at the University of Washington under the leadership of [Dr. Lili Lengua](#) her team created curriculum Be Real, that was based in cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness and bringing those two, Bringing CBT and mindfulness together really deliberately, to support student stress coping, and through the group format also nurturing connection. In 2017, Be Real was piloted for undergraduate students. We saw positive results in their ability to cope with stress effectively and feeling more connected to each other and from that point we became pretty interested in how we make accessible programs like Be Real to the greater UW community, and particularly for communities with students who, experience barriers to accessing other typical mental health resources on campus.

So, to that end, we trained, for example, advisors, working with different marginalized student groups. To train them we brought staff through Be Real. We brought them through the six-week program and they learned the same set of resilience, coping strategies based in CBT and mindfulness and compassion, self-compassion that Anne was talking about earlier, movement based practices and what we saw was one by going through the program and getting some support, facilitating, they could then bring Be Real to their student communities and lead the group effectively. And we saw similar results where students stress coping was improving, um, and they were feeling more connected, but also there was a positive impact on the staff themselves because they had gone through the group and learn the skills.

And that staff were then able to bring those skills and mindsets to other parts of their work, like individual sessions with students. To their supervisor, supervisee relationships to team meetings. And then, furthermore it had a

positive impact on their lives at home, their parenting, their relationships, their own stress coping.

And so, at this point we've introduced the Be Real program to over 250 staff across our three campuses. They participated in the program; a good number of those staff have been trained to facilitate the group in their faction of the university. Then we've trained, based on that scalability, thousands of students have been able to go through the program and we're now able to pilot what the impact of Be Real is on other colleges and universities. All that to say, the program exists. We're always seeking new places to bring it to. It's effective and, I think it's a really good example of too, not just what we're doing, what programs we're developing, but how we're doing our work and being able to collaborate deeply with a profound, like profoundly amazing research center. The Center for Child and Family Wellbeing is what we ought to be doing more of on campus is bringing our wisdom together through those types of collaborative relationships.

**Kate Mulligan:** If listeners wanted to learn more about Be Real or opportunities that might exist for them to access some of that training, we can put some links in the show notes. That sounds really promising and really exciting. So thank you for that.

So, I know in my classrooms I've experienced a huge jump in the number of students who seem anxious and a huge jump in the number of students who come to me saying, I am extremely anxious about this, and I want you to help me. And I sometimes come up a bit empty on that, you got some tips for me?

**Anne Browning:** I would say, and this might be in the broader context of the last two and a half years, but early on we started working with a psychologist, [Lisa Damour](#) who shared some really kind of helpful ways of thinking about anxiety, that have affected how I perceive it and kind navigate it. One that anxiety is actually a very normal human emotion, is in fact a very helpful one. If we see anxiety as kind of the that kind of sense of threat in the back of my mind that makes me pay attention to something, you know, relative to the pandemic. It's why I was hitting elevator buttons with my elbow for over two years, remembering to wear a mask when I was in various places like these are, you know, healthy anxiety that helps remind me to stay safe within my environment. I think what we see that's problematic is when that anxiety tips towards over overwhelm, usually that's when we are actually starting to



overestimate the threats in our environment and also starting to, underestimate our ability to mitigate that threat.

And that's, that's kind of a pandemic specific set of examples in terms of kind of perception of threat, being out and about in the world. However, I think it does kind of manifest as well as learners within a classroom. And I think we certainly see folks overestimating the threats and the challenges in their environment and tipping towards that overwhelm.

And in a way I think it's, it's helpful to kind of do the pause the, the half step back and kind of seeing the bigger picture, seeing kind of what are the things that they are grateful for in the world? What are the things that are challenging? And kind of get away from that, like narrow focus on the hard thing right in front of them and help them see a bit of that bigger picture and help them having that, that perspective of why is this level of anxiety becoming overwhelmed? How much you know attention am I giving in? What is my perception of how big it is versus kind of what I can do to actually control the factors in my environment? As an educator, I typically try and help folks think through kind of, their own agency, what, what is within their control and what are the factors they're out of their control.

And as a student, what, what are the things that I can't control? Attending class, doing the research, what's out of control is actually my grade. That is something that's subjective. That's beyond my, my ability to control. But if I'm controlling for all the factors I can, I can typically get my anxiety to drop quite a bit as well.

**Kate Mulligan:** Thank you. Do you have anything to add, Megan?

**Megan Kennedy:** Yeah, I think, one of the ways we talk about what Anne was just describing and Be Real is by referring to, our window of stress tolerance and, Today, most of the day I've been existing within my window of stress tolerance. And that isn't that I haven't experienced some level of stress or anxiety at different moments of the day, but it's been like within that range that's, tolerable, but throughout the day or throughout the week, there might be times that I get kicked out of my window of stress tolerance and into a place of like hyper arousal. Which it sounds like Kate, some of your students might be coming to you with when they're out of their window of tolerance or hypo arousal, where folks might be retreating back to their rooms and, not, not wanting to come out and both of those are manifestations of this heightened



sense of anxiety in this case that since we're talking about anxiety, so the skills that we're teaching and Be Real are twofold. One is when I get kicked out of my window of stress tolerance, which might be a normal experience, sometimes it happens.

How can I return to my window of tolerance? What practices can. Put in that when I notice, when I, when I am able to do what Anne just described as that pause, what can I do then in order to come back and, and maybe a self-compassion practice might be the thing that's helpful in that moment to remind myself that I'm not the only one experiencing this problem or two say something kind to myself or just to be mindfully aware of like where I'm at. Right or maybe it's a simple breathing practice or just, a practice of like returning to some grounding, something grounding and then the second piece is how can I expand my window of stress tolerance, just generally so that I can exist in the world with a bigger window.

and some of that is like just really basic stuff. Like I have a six year old, I can guarantee to you it's basic, his window of tolerance, is bigger, when he has slept and he's had food and he's been outside and he's moved around. And the same is true for us and so if I can keep that in mind, my window of stress tolerance is certainly bigger throughout the day.

I'm less irritable, less anxious, et cetera. Those are really just kind of like the basis of, of why the different types of skills and practices, are helpful because they help us with the expanding and the coming back.

**Kate Mulligan:** Thank you for reminding us of that. And you know, as basic as it may be, I think we can often forget it in the moment. I would like to put a plug in for the learning communities that Anne's been running on wellness for the faculty and put a plug in for the Resilience guide on how to develop a classroom that fosters wellbeing and resilience skills in students.

It sounds like I have to put a plug in for Be Real too, which is new to me and I can't wait to explore that some more and maybe see if we can get something going here in the medical school with with that!

**Megan Kennedy:** Yeah. And you could join a group, Kate.

**Kate Mulligan:** I would love to.

**Megan Kennedy:** Yeah. You're welcome.

**Kate Mulligan:** And can say, I'm so thankful to both of you and the fact that our paths crossed when they did because, I've taken on board some of the things that you've both been working on and, as you mentioned it, it feels like the benefit to me is as faculty, is just as great as the benefit that my students have vocalized it has been to them. And I love the idea of this being a cultural change that's, sort of happening at the grassroots level as well as, you working at the highest systems level. I think that's, super energizing and super exciting. And, I thank you for all the work that you've done.

Any last words that you'd like to offer to our listeners who are out there trying to gain wisdom about helping our students be the best that they can be and helping our learning environments be the best that they can be?

**Anne Browning:** I would say, be true to yourself, and how you do this work of trying to integrate more wellbeing into your teaching, into your curriculum, into your pedagogy, and really, really be as authentic as you can be. The more we show up as, humans, ourselves and, and really embrace our own humanity, the more we create space for all of our students, from all different backgrounds to find a sense of belonging as well. So, embrace each other's humanity to the extent that we can.

**Kate Mulligan:** Hard act to follow Megan! You got any last words you'd like to share?

**Megan Kennedy:** Well, we're in this conversation the first week of fall quarter. And so we're starting this new academic year and I have the honor of working with, the Dean of Undergraduate Academic Affairs. His name's Ed Taylor, just an amazing, and profound leader at the university. And he sent a welcome message to our division, welcoming us to the new fall quarter and setting a vision. For what we might focus on this year. And there were three words that stood out to me in his email that I'll, I'll just share as my closing remarks because they're the words that I'm leaning into, in my own work as I, as I start fall quarter.

And the three words that stood out to me in his email were he encouraged us to focus on the notion of belonging, the notion of interconnectedness, and the idea that we're an ecosystem. And so if folks take away anything from the conversation today, I hope that there was some connection to these ideas of

creating and fostering a sense of belonging, really leaning into our interconnectedness, the fact of our interconnectedness and the seeing things as a system, the ecosystem perspective.

**Kate Mulligan:** Thank you so much for your time, really appreciate you and everything that you're doing. Thank you.

**Anne Browning and Megan Kennedy:** Thank you, Kate.

**Amanda Garza:** Thank you to Anne and Megan for taking the time to talk with us about well-being in higher education, and thanks to you all for joining us for this CLIMEcast episode. All resources mentioned can be found in the show notes for this episode, including the episode transcription. Don't forget to subscribe to CLIMEcasts on the streaming app of your choice to get updated when new episodes are released! Thanks!