Transcript for Episode 9: Combating the Mental Health Crisis with Dr. Judith Cukor (RECAP)

*Politics Under the Microscope*

**Ellie:** [00:00:00] Hi everyone! Welcome back to Politics Under the Microscope. My name is Ellie, and I am a second-year graduate students studying cancer at Rockefeller University here in New York City. And I am joined by my lovely cohosts:

**Naira:** Hi everyone. I'm Naira. I also study cancer at Weill Cornell Medicine.

**Joanna:** Hi, I'm Joanna and I also study cancer at Rockefeller.

**Nina:** Hi, I'm Nina and I didn't study cancer and I graduated from Weill Cornell.

**Ellie:** Awesome and welcome back friends. We are going to be recapping our second installment out of three for our mental health series. This time, we interviewed Dr. Judith Cukor, PhD, who is an expert in behavioral psychiatry at Weill Cornell, who provided us with a lot of key insights into tackling our own mental health struggles.

And so during our conversation, Dr. Cukor covered the relatively recent but [00:01:00] still notable event of Simone Biles and how she pulled out of the Olympics in Tokyo, citing mental health challenges. Naomi Osaka also did this pretty recently as well. And so this is what Dr. Cukor had to say:

**Judith:** Simone Biles was a great example of saying like, "I need to step away for a second." It's not necessarily stepping away, but it's reading with red flags within oneself and saying, "I need to take care of myself right now."

**Ellie:** And so that being said, what does her decision specifically, Simone Biles' decision, mean to each of us? I don't know if you guys were affected specifically by this decision in the sense of maybe it perhaps changed your outlook or maybe your take on different mental health struggles that we may have throughout our lives. But also what are our own red flags, like when something is wrong or that we need help.

One of my red flags that I am very aware of when I am either pushing myself too hard, or I need to talk to my [00:02:00] therapist or something, is when I can't wake up at my normal time. It's like when I feel this urge to sleep a lot more than I need to. I don't know if you guys can relate to that. But I know that I am burning out or I need to slow down when I am unable to get out of bed or don't want to get out of bed.

So that being said, do you guys have red flags that you guys have been kind of primed to identify in the context of mental health challenges?

**Joanna:** I also have a similar issue where I don't feel like, you know, getting out of bed, like just staying in bed all day. That's when I get like really depressed. So me not being able to get out of bed is like really, really severe. Something a little bit less severe is like me not wanting to come to lab. Or like, I realize that my thought pattern has become very like extremely negative, like negativity-based then a lot of times, sometimes I'll like realize that and then I'll start writing down [00:03:00] like positive things just to kind of remind myself that, even though there's a lot of things that aren't what I would like in my life right now, there's also a lot of things that I am fortunate to have that like other people might not necessarily have, and sometimes I just need to remind myself. I guess that's a red flag, but that's how I rectify my red flag, if that makes sense.

**Ellie:** No, but like negative thought processes is very indicative of something going on. Nina and Naira, did you guys have anything you wanted to add?

**Nina:** I think like my red flag and it's not even like a red flag, like, it feels like I am a bull running in like, Pamplona during the running of the bulls. It's like if I have a lot of stuff going on, I'll know like how busy I am or how stressful it is based on sort of not updating it in my planner. And I know that that might sound really ridiculous, but like, for me, that's kind of how I keep track of everything. That's sort of like how I've managed, like podcast stuff, and then like school or working on other stuff. And I'll [00:04:00] know sort of like if I'm taking on too much at a time, if it's like, are you finished reading for this piece of policy. Like, I'll know like if I write in those updates and if I haven't done it and it's checked off and like, I have all of that together. But if I'm so busy that I'm like going from seven or 8:00 AM until like two or 3:00 AM, obviously I'm not like," let me check things off my planner". Right? Like it kind of gets caught in the shuffle. So it's like taking that time to center, whether it's like, as I'm eating dinner, as I'm walking my dog sort of mentally checking stuff off, like, "okay, make five, 10 minutes. Go back, add this, fix this, do whatever. So you can sort of be on the right course of everything for tomorrow, the day after, etc."

**Ellie:** Yeah, absolutely. What you said about not updating your planner really resonated with me. In fact, if you wanted to check, if you wanted to track my blue periods - I call them my blue periods, like periods of like sadness, burnout and poor outlook on life - you just look for the empty days in my planner. That's all you have to do. And then [00:05:00] you'll know. So that's great: knowing what each of our red flags are is a way in which we can kind of self-monitor how we're doing mentally.

And so my next thing, the next thing that Dr. Cukor and I discussed, which I really enjoyed, is how we partake in self-care. And so, as we brought up multiple times already, self-care looks different to everyone. And this is what Dr. Cukor had to say about self-care.

**Judith:** And I sort of think of you know, we have this sort of cup of resources and when we're stressed and we're working hard, we drain that cup, and we need to have those times and those activities that we do that restore that cup of resources for us. And so, in an ideal world, it's, you know, it's larger blocks of time, so it means taking vacation sometimes, right? And I think, you know, as a culture, we're moving towards this, but it's not just okay, it should be a respected and laudable [00:06:00] thing to say, you know, "I'm taking this time off and I'm not going to be that reachable." That's important for all of us. You know, even for scientists who do experiments, you have to work around the timing on it, but it's really important to step away because we can't restore ourselves without it. So it's the larger blocks of time. It's the taking an evening to go to a play or something like that, right? So it's the leaving work so that you can go to the gym and then it is those small amounts of blocks of times too. And here's where the 15 minutes does speak to me, is I don't think that should be the totality of it, but you know, there has been research that looked at people in an office who took a break to do meditation or mindfulness for like 15 minutes. And they found that they were more efficient and more productive afterwards. So, somehow, in some ways we sort of feel like "I have to just work, I have to work and any minute that I step away from my work is a waste of time."

**Ellie:** And also, we talked about how there was this recent article that created a stir on Twitter that said [00:07:00] that graduate students should allocate 15 minutes of self-care as a treat daily. And so I fervently disagree with that statement, but my question for each of you guys is what does self-care look like to you? You know, when we think about what is a reasonable amount of self-care or what are some self-care activities, what comes to mind for you guys?

**Naira:** Honestly for me, it comes in the form of many things. But I think the main thing is being in the headspace to take a moment and just be mindful of what happened that day or what you're going through. The other thing that comes up a lot for me, that I'm trying to work on is self-compassion.

**Ellie:** Yeah, I totally agree. I think especially in academia, self-deprecating talk is very, very common and I definitely do it as well. It's a form of humor I like to think, but it's also a coping mechanism, I would say. [00:08:00] And so Nina, what does self-care look like to you?

**Nina:** I think self-care can look like a couple of different things. Like I know for me - one, I mean, I grew up in Pennsylvania, so like, you know, nature's beautiful. And I think that's like one of the hardest things about being in New York City, right? Like you don't have a ton of green space, but for me, like self-care is even if it's, whenever I'm walking my dog, like extending her walk times, like walking down by the seaport or like walking over to Tribeca and like looking at the green space around Brookfield. I think like that for me is great. Like it's a way of sort of decompressing and grounding myself, like, “All right. We've done this. It was a busy day, but here we are. We're just like chilling in nature. We're just enjoying the sound of the river. We're just like taking in how everything looks like right now. Everything has like lights for the Christmas season. I don't know if everything that I need to accomplish is done.” If I actually have time to read for leisure. For me, it's also keeping contact with like my friends and my family. Not even just like sending a quick text because there are times where, like, I don't answer my text for four or five hours straight, or I don't answer my calls and it's just like [00:09:00] taking that time, even if it's 20 or 30 minutes to go through all of it together and like send like laughing reactions or like comment on stuff. Just sort of taking that time to say, “okay, we're done with the professional stuff that I need to do throughout the day.”

**Ellie:** Absolutely. What self-care looks like to me is like, for example, I took a mental health day today. But I think my main go-to's for self-care is first of all, yoga, second bubble tea, third buying more skincare items from Sephora, and treating myself to retail therapy. Those are my main self-care go to's. Joanna, what about you? What are your self-care go to's if you wanted to treat yourself or take care of yourself?

**Joanna:** I also do yoga and bubble tea.

**Ellie:** Amazing. Let's do that together.

**Joanna:** I don't really do skin care because I guess I realized, [00:10:00] I don't know. I guess it's supposed to help.

I haven't really seen anything when I used to do skincare. So then now I just cover up my blemishes with makeup. So I guess like a self-care thing for myself is makeup, but I don't know, like, I do it every morning, so it kind of sets my tone for the day. Like if I look good then I feel good. I guess that's the saying? I mean, other than yoga, I have a really expensive Equinox membership that I like splurge on. And like, they also have other classes I like to take. So other than yoga, I also like Pilates and barre. What other self-care things? So I do write in a little journal. Like after therapy, I usually write down what we talked about for that session or if I'm like not feeling good. Then I also write that down. And sometimes if I am feeling like really good, I'll still [00:11:00] write that down so that when I'm not feeling good, I can look back on when I did write something good.

**Ellie:** That is a great segue into the next thing I wanted to ask, which is therapy. And Dr. Cukor is a therapist. And so she had these important tidbits to say about therapy.

**Judith:** So there are a lot of different roles that therapy can play. And I will admit my bias straight out, right? I'm a psychologist and so, you know, I'm a big fan of the benefits that therapy can provide.

I think for each person, there's a different bar when the right time is for therapy. So I liken it to, you know, taking care of a car, right? So some people will like, you know, take care of their oil change within the right amount of miles every time, you know, some people wait until the "check oil" light goes on and then they're like, "Oh, I have to get to it."

And some people wait until they're on the side of the road with their engine's blown because they never handled it and then they go to the garage, right? So, you know, I think some people benefit from therapy just as a maintenance thing. It helps them in that way. Some people wait until the check oil light is on, until there's some red [00:12:00] flags and that's totally okay.

You know, that's a totally acceptable time, right, saying I'm doing fine and then, you know, if there's red flags, if there's problems, I'm going to go seek some help. And some people wait until that crisis is happening and they're sitting on the side of the road and absolutely then you should seek some help.

But certainly, so, and what that looks like is when it's affecting really your work, your happiness, and it's no longer that you're going through a challenging time, you're going through a negative time. And then for sure you want to reach out for psychiatric services.

So I'll highlight maybe a couple of things that therapy can do for you. The first is, we talked before about those negative thought patterns that we often fall into, right? And sometimes we lose sight of things. We're not so objective, right? So therapy can be that objective voice in helping you to evaluate, right?

It helps you to gain perspective. You have somebody outside of yourself and somebody outside of your peer group and family group, so that you can be very open and honest, not worrying about, not only if they're judging you, but also about how your pain is impacting them. You don't have to take any of that into consideration.

[00:13:00] This is somebody just entirely objective, and they can help to point out those thought patterns that are not helpful and help you see other perspectives. Therapy can also help you be more productive. It can help you with sort of behavioral strategies, help, you know, suggest for you ways that can help you be more productive.

It can help you with encouragement, with grounding. And then, you know, I'll just add in here, you know, we know that people sometimes go to therapy for relationship counseling, refer for advice on how to, you know, deal with certain relationships. You know, grad students are dealing with a very, some very major relationships, including with their PI, right?

And sometimes, you know, having a person on the outside who can help you take apart that relationship. How do you communicate well in that relationship? How do you deal with different expectations, all of those kinds of things, right? Sometimes that outside person can be really helpful for that.

So there's a whole bunch of ways that therapy can be helpful.

**Ellie:** And so if you guys feel comfortable sharing, obviously don't worry about it if not, but what are your thoughts and experiences with therapy? Especially because it's becoming, I [00:14:00] think more common especially for people our age and our generation has a mental health crisis. I mean, there's a pandemic going on, of course. And so what are your guys’ thoughts, experiences with therapy, and what would you say to graduate students that are thinking about participating in therapy or seeking a therapist?

**Joanna:** So I've been doing therapy for like two and a half years. So it really started mostly because of I was worried about like moving to grad school and moving to a new city and starting like a whole new life. And so I started therapy initially, I think because of that, but I feel like therapy is great because your needs kind of like change over time as you get better at dealing with certain things that you weren't able to deal with previously.

So I think therapy has helped me become, [00:15:00] I guess, like stronger. Cause I think I used to get really overwhelmed and really anxious with so many things happening in our, in my life and therapy has helped me to cope with, even though there's like so many things going on in my life, like how to compartmentalize it in a way that it doesn't like overwhelm me or like stress me out constantly.

**Naira:** To add onto that, if you're considering therapy, just do it. I think like my personal experience with this is that it's absolutely transformative. I don't think I would've learned as much about myself if I hadn't gone for it. Talking to someone about the way you think and perceive situations, especially those that are stressful to you is really eye-opening and it helps you handle those situations differently. And if you find that you're not handling those situations as well as you [00:16:00] should, or think you should, even after talking through it with someone, they're there to support you and help you figure out what you could do differently. But the beauty of it is that it's a very like logical and scientific approach to a problem of any kind. So whether that's, you know, getting anxious or stressed out by things that wouldn't, that don't seem to stress other people out around you and basically the counselor helps you figure out like, okay, well, why is this happening? And then how could we begin to train your mind to see it differently? But yeah, definitely go for it.

**Ellie:** I think it's super objective. Like, in my opinion, you're getting an objective, nonjudgmental - of course, like therapists may judge, but they're not really supposed to do that. And I don't feel judged at all during therapy. I've seen two therapists so far, and I've never felt judged about sharing things. And so it's [00:17:00] kind of like, I get the advice of a medical professional, right? About things that are bothering me or whatever. And I actually get good advice because, you know, they have the training to do that. And so my advice to graduate students now is to find out what mental health resources your institution provides. At Rockefeller, we have a psychiatrist on retainer that serves Rockefeller students. Just find out what your mental health resources are at your institution, because therapists are really expensive, especially in New York City.

I think the one that I would like to go to next is Imposter Syndrome. And so just for our audience, Imposter Syndrome is feeling like you don't belong in a space that you don't have the credibility, or the merits to belong and so in academia a lot of times, right? It's like all of the people that are here were like top of their class, or really, really smart, or we're always like the big fish in their ponds. Well, now you put all the big fishes in a single [00:18:00] pond and that's how I feel like it is. And so this is what Dr. Cukor said about maintaining or managing your imposter syndrome as a graduate student.

**Judith:** And one statistic that I saw was that, over 70% of people report that they felt imposter syndrome at some point in their life, right? So if you haven't felt imposter syndrome, it's rarer, right?

So this is something that people feel, right? That they don't measure up. And this is exactly what we were talking about before. Those are the skewed thoughts of anxiety and insecurity, right? That's your anxiety bully being like, "I don't know. These people seem really smart…" And I think it's really important to realize, first of all, again, this is a common thing, but I think it's important to step back and remind yourself that you are likely underestimating your own abilities, right? That's where the skewed thinking comes in. You're not giving yourself credit and you're likely overestimating the ability of everybody else, right? And if we look at the 70% number, right, if you're feeling that way, a whole [00:19:00] lot of other people are looking at you and thinking, "Oh my God, I'm not as smart as that person. Oh my God, I don't measure up to that person", right? So, you know, this doesn't come from any basis in, you know, in objective thought and reality, it comes from our insecurities, and we need to remind ourselves that and use our self-talk. You know, if you're in grad school, it means that someone has looked hard at what you've done to this point and said, we are investing in you, you have what it takes and just bring that, you know, willingness to work and that enthusiasm to the table, and you have nothing left to prove and you don't have to work so hard to prove it to yourself.

**Ellie:** And so that being said, how do you guys cope with Imposter Syndrome? If you guys have dealt with it before?

**Naira:** It's really funny. Someone asked me today, like as a way to challenge, you know, my self perception in a positive way. And they were like, how did you know that you were qualified enough to do a PhD and my cynical response [00:20:00] was I didn't, nobody does. Nobody in our fields actually feels qualified or maybe I feel like half of us don't, the other half are tenured professors, but even they don't sometimes, you know, so it's about considering, you know, the people that you work with that are so highly accomplished, they probably have doubts of their own because a lot of us were trained to see, like, especially in academia, you're only as good as your last success. So if you got that grant, it doesn't mean the next one is guaranteed. Right? If you publish a paper, it doesn't mean you'll publish one next year and these are all very true.

This is reality. But we need to train ourselves to think in a way that doesn't let this reality define [00:21:00] our self-worth. Because a lot of us do; we let it take over completely. And it's like, I'm only a good scientist, or I'm only a scientist that deserves to do this work. If I get, you know, every grant I applied for and, you know, publish every paper I submit, which is never going to happen.

**Joanna:** So for me, it's a little bit different, like the way I've dealt with it and, it might not be like the best way for everyone, but it's worked for me. So everyone's like, “Oh, we need to like remind ourselves that we have all these abilities and skills and we're likely underestimating our abilities.” For me, that kind of thinking has actually never worked for me in helping my imposter syndrome, but what has worked for me is thinking about my productivity - that's what I mean, like, it doesn't necessarily work for everybody - but for me, what helps is like thinking like, “Okay, am I going to spend all this time thinking [00:22:00] about why I'm not good enough, or am I just going to go ahead and make actual progress?” So that's kind of helped me because then I don't actually wallow in these like really negative thoughts about myself. I just, you know, don't think about it and then I can actually like work better. I think I spent a lot of time thinking about why I wasn't good enough or why I wasn't as smart as certain people. And then I kind of realized that it was all just a waste of time, just constantly thinking about this and I can use my time more productively by doing something else, like actually having fun or actually thinking about another idea or actually like doing more work that will contribute to the end of my PhD, so that's how I dealt with my imposter syndrome.

**Ellie:** I feel like that's a good example of sublimation and instead of taking negative energy and putting it towards like, you know, anxiety-inducing thoughts, or anxious thinking, it's like work it out instead. On that note, that's a wrap on our recap with our interview with Dr. Judith [00:23:00] Cukor, feel free to check out the full episode, if you would like everything that she has said during our very engaging and thought-provoking discussion. Thank you again for tuning into Politics Under the Microscope.