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

[00:00:00]

**Ellie:** A lot of graduate students struggle with mental health throughout graduate school.

And so one question that we want to really tackle is what are the causes of these mental health struggles? What are the roots? Does it tend to be pre-existing conditions or do people tend to develop this anxiety and depression that we see a lot in graduate school during their PhD?

**Judith:** That's a really good question. First of all, I want to preface all this by saying, what I'm going to say here are my own views. I'm not representing any institution or anything like that. And I also want to preface that the answer to that question by saying, you know, many students are gonna feel stressed in graduate school, right?

And that's not objectively bad, right? It is a stressful experience. Many things in life are stressful. It's also not unique to graduate school or the biomedical sciences, right? We see this in medical school and law school - any sort of competitive environment is going to cause some stress. And I think part of the learning experience is learning how to manage and juggle multiple stressors.

And so [00:01:00] if it tips into the realm where you need more help, I see that as a learning opportunity, that's part of what we need to learn for life. So back to your question of what's the cause of these things - so certainly graduate school is stressful. The question of whether these symptoms or most of the causes, you know, whether symptoms are pre-morbid, whether people have come in with some of these symptoms and they're triggered again by the stresses of graduate school or whether it starts because of graduate school… I think there's not really a way to know. So, there's a study that the World Health Organization did in 2018 and I think they found about 1/3 of graduate students had symptoms of depression and anxiety. And then, there was a survey that was published in Nature a couple of years ago, they asked the students specifically, “How many of you have sought help specifically for symptoms related to your graduate studies?”

Now, again, you know, it could be a self-selecting sample here, right? So about a third of people, they have reported [00:02:00] that they did. We don't really know who's answering that. Also let's add onto the fact that, students in graduate school are in an age range when many mental health disorders first present themselves.

So we don't actually know what would have happened otherwise. Anxiety and depression are part of the human condition. So, you know, we don't know if it's graduate school in particular, plus I'll add on the fact that, you know, without making sweeping generalizations, many individuals who have gone into these types of programs have a high risk for perfectionism and high intelligence and things that correlate with anxiety and depression as well.

So I think that all of that speaks to the fact that we don't really know, but the answer is probably that there are both categories, right? That there are people who have a history of mental health conditions with symptoms triggered by the stress, others with new onset. And we can't really say what would have happened otherwise, because it's a complicated picture, I think.

**Ellie:** Absolutely. I think that's well said. And in light of that, with graduate students presenting a lot of [00:03:00] symptoms with anxiety and depression, what advice do you have for graduate students to improve their mental health overall?

**Judith:** So this I could probably speak about for an hour in and of itself. Let me start by saying, and maybe this is probably the most important thing that I think people can take away is that, you know, we have a great capacity for resilience and, you know, resilience doesn't mean not having challenges.

It doesn't mean not struggling. It means finding the capacity to, you know, survive and then sometimes even thrive through adversity. So, you know, sometimes we get knocked down and the question is how do we get ourselves to not stay down? How do we pick ourselves up again? And so I think part of what we want to do is pay attention to our mental health so that we can access that resilience.

And this is again, universal, right? If you're feeling, I'll just speak to people out there, if you're feeling like you're having symptoms of anxiety or depression, you are not in the minority, right? Many people are. [00:04:00] So the question is how do we improve our mental health?

So the first thing I would say is to be proactive and self-aware, right? Often we think like, you know, I'm really stressed out or I'm really unhappy or I'm really anxious, but I wish I had less stress. It's often we have a lot of stress, right? That's not necessarily gonna go away, right? So if we know that we have, you know, if we know that we're struggling a little bit, we need to look for those red flags and say, "Okay, wait, this is a time that I need to double down on my resources and see what I can do to change things for myself because I'm struggling a little bit."

Right? We don't have to look very far; we just had the Olympics. And I think, you know, 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."

So figuring out how to take care of yourself. And that leads, I think, to the second thing, which is, you know, we're all tired of hearing it, but self-care is super essential. So we all talk about it [00:05:00] and we all pay lip service to it, but we rarely do it. But honestly, when you're saying I have thoughts cycling through my head and I can't stop ruminating about things. And also, I haven't slept in three nights, right? Well, it's probably not going to be able to feel better until you get some sleep, right? So you really do want to make sure that you're sleeping, you're eating, you're exercising if possible, right? Like you're taking care of your basic needs because that's going to be really key.

You know, maintaining your physical health is going to be really key to maintaining your mental health. So we have the self-awareness, we have the self-care. Two more things that I'll just mention here, although again, I could go on for a long time. But the third thing I'll mention, and this is really important, is sort of an awareness of the thoughts and messaging in your mind, right? So here's where we have a little bit of control. We tend to, you know, sometimes get into patterns of thinking, especially with anxiety and depression, where our thoughts are a little bit skewed, right? Let's say we're being really harsh judges of ourselves, or we're [00:06:00] telling ourselves some really negative messaging.

And sometimes we have to take a step back and say like, you know, I don't necessarily buy into these thoughts to challenge those thoughts, to negate them, right? To talk back to those thoughts that are feeding into the anxiety and depressions that are running with them, right? So for example, you know, I did a terrible job at that presentation at my lab meeting and everyone's going to think I don't belong here, right? So taking a step back and saying like, was it really so bad? Like maybe it wasn't as good as you wanted it, but if it had been another student, would you be judging them so harshly? Wouldn't you just assume they were having a rough day?

So stepping back and sort of, you know, challenging those thoughts that are feeding into those mood symptoms can sometimes be really helpful. And the same with, you know, challenging the way that you're viewing interactions or communication with other people. And I think that's a super important thing and that's a lot of the NIH's Building a Resilient Scientists series.

That's a big piece of what they talk about there. And I think it's a big piece of cognitive [00:07:00] behavioral therapy. It's just a really important tool, I think, in terms of dealing with stress in the long run.

**Nina:** The NIH's "Building a Resilience Scientist" series is focused on assisting undergrads, graduate students, post-baccs, and postdoctoral fellows in the sciences develop the confidence and resilience needed not to just survive, but thrive in scientific environments. All six webinars are available on YouTube under the NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education channel.

**Judith:** And then the final thing I'll just say about this is just more generally, building mental flexibility.

And that means that sort of rolling with the punches. So I think, yeah, we'd like to control things and we like to start to like plan out how things are going to go. And then when things don't go that way, it can really make us question things that can make us depressed, things like that, right? So I think mental flexibility means like, that's not how you planned it, but it's going to be okay, right? So yeah, that experiment didn't work and yeah, you don't want to go back and start again and waste two [00:08:00] months, right? But you can, right? Like, it's not like, "Oh my God, I can't do this."

It's "You can, you just prefer not to do it." And probably every scientist will tell you of the things that didn't go the way they've planned. And we know in general, that mental flexibility is associated not just more success, but just more happiness. And it makes sense, right? It's just, we can't control everything.

So if you have the ability to sort of pivot when things don't go your way and understand the larger picture and understand, but that's okay. I'll I can do this. That I think is another really important piece to improving our own mental health.

**Ellie:** You kept mentioning these red flags and I'm just wondering, just thinking about my personal experience. I often, when I encounter a potential red flag, I don't actually know for sure if it's a red flag or if I'm just supposed to experience that feeling as a graduate student trying to pursue my PhD.

So could you outline the criteria for a red flag, like how to exactly identify it rather than just [00:09:00] say, "Oh, I'm supposed to feel this way because I'm in a competitive research environment" or, you know, “I'm a hyperperfectionist student that's potentially failing at experiments"?

**Judith:** So that's an excellent question and the question is better than the answer, right? So I think what you're saying is it's really hard to know, right? Like, is this just like, "Yeah, I'm feeling stressed because it's stressful" or like, "This is beyond how I should feel", right? And I think the answer is there's going to be a different bar for everybody, right?

But in a general sense, what I would advise people is, you know, there's a difference between waking up in the morning and feeling like, "Oh gosh, okay. I have to like summon the energy to get up and, you know, waking up in the morning and just saying, I'm not, I'm not going in today", right? So like, if you're not functioning to the standards, right? If you're not getting up and going in, if you're avoiding people's calls, if you're isolating yourself, those are the kinds of red flags. Even before that, right? So there's that functional impairment.

But there's also the "How much [00:10:00] of a toll is it taking on you?" And I think you have to just know yourself, right? So if you're feeling stressed, it's one thing. If you, if you're feeling, you know, physiologically activated all the time, if you can't relax, if you can't stop ruminating about things, right? There's sort of like this line that it crosses for you where it's like, “This is too much”, right? This is, you know, this is really impairing. And when we talk about mental health diagnoses, if you look in the DSM5, almost every mental health disorder has the symptoms that are at the diagnostic criteria.

And then one of the qualifications for a disorder is that it either causes functional impairment or it causes significant distress. And that's the subjective piece there. It's like, you know, you have to know yourself and know like, is this getting in the way? Is this not the way that you are? Even when you're a little bit stressed?

So it takes, again, it goes back to that self-awareness.

**Nina:** A moment ago, Dr. Cukor mentioned the DSM5. If you're unfamiliar, the DSM 5 is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. [00:11:00] It is the American Psychiatric Association's publication that provides a common language for clinicians to communicate about patients and establishes consistent and reliable diagnoses based on a set of criteria that can be used in research and treatment of mental disorders.

**Ellie:** And then also another thing I wanted to ask is about the self-care piece. I am a big self-care advocate. I always encourage my friends to indulge maybe a little bit more than they should maybe, but with self-care, I'm wondering, in your opinion, I know it looks different for everyone, but what effects should it have on you?

And what does it look like in an ideal situation? I know it's subjective based on the person, but generally what is self-care? There was a recent publication where some individuals talked about time management in graduate school and they allocated 15 minutes of self-care as a treat.

**Nina:** Here, Ellie is referring to a paper released in July of 2021 called "10 Simple [00:12:00] Rules to Improve Academic Work-life Balance" that caused quite a stir on Twitter.

**Ellie:** And I'm just wondering, could you kind of speak to how long self-care should be? You know, how do we know if our self-care is sufficient, if it's adequate?

**Judith:** That's so interesting when you, when you cite the number on it, it seems so strange to me. I understand the idea there and it's actually an important concept.

So for me, I sort of think of self-care in sort of two kinds of categories, the first is nutrition. If you've just been grabbing things that aren't healthy for you and you're not sleeping, right? So it's sleep and nutrition and you're not moving.

You're just going between the lab and your apartment, right? So those are all things that I think are just like the basic ingredients of self-care that we really want to be careful about. The other part that you're talking about, which is work-life balance and things like that, I think is super important, right? Which is having times for yourself, where you engage in other things that is not school and basic life [00:13:00] necessity. And I think that's part of, you know, I think that's the challenge in graduate school very much and for life, right? You know, life has responsibilities and if you're just doing your responsibilities, even if you're passionate about your work, you're losing out on a lot of things.

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 thing to say, you know, "I'm taking this time off and I'm not going to be that reachable." That 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 [00:14:00] 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."

But in fact, first of all, we want to have a more full life than just work, right? It's not a waste of time if you're doing something enjoyable, if you're reading a book, right? It doesn't have to have that, you know, a purpose work-wise. But also we know that we're just better for it.

We know that when we take a break, when we, you know, restore ourselves, we can actually be more efficient and more functional. So there's really a positive, you know, effect [00:15:00] of having this balance in our lives. However, we make that balance and that means taking advantage of the bigger times and when you can't do the bigger times, still building in those smaller times and I'll just end by saying, you know, I will sometimes in a very hectic day, I will say, you know, I'm going to have a cup of tea for 10 minutes, and this is my break time, right? Like I remind myself, this is what I'm going to get restored and I'm doing this in the act of relaxing and I'm going to try and get like, you know, get myself to sort of calm down a little bit because we need to build those times into our day.

**Ellie:** I think how you said that was really helpful in terms of not putting like a constraint. Because when I first read this publication, my initial thought was, "Well, I did yoga for an hour and that is way longer than 15 minutes."

And so I feel like there's this pressure to conform to what someone says or thinks. And so it seems like it's very much more like a guideline in a [00:16:00] sense of finding something that rejuvenates you, as you mentioned.

**Judith:** Exactly. And it's about finding that effect, making sure that it is restorative and rejuvenative in that way.

**Ellie:** And that can vary based on the individual for sure.

**Judith:** Right, exactly.

**Ellie:** And so tying into this self care line of thinking, what are some coping mechanisms that you found in your work that are effective for graduate students?

**Judith:** I think coping mechanisms take different forms. So the first thing I'll say is social support and social interaction. And I think, you know, even if you say that you're an introvert and you know, you thrive in your own company, we're all as human beings, we all need social interaction and we all benefit from interactions with others and so, you know, that is a huge coping mechanism - is to make sure that you're interacting. You call people, you get together with people. If you don't know people, if you're new to your graduate school, right? Go to a lecture, go to a meeting, challenge yourself to introduce yourself to one new person each time, go to a club, right?

You know, that really, [00:17:00] it helps to ground us within the community. And that really helps us. I think there's also, you know, individual behaviors we can do, you know, exercising is great for us physically and mentally, going outside, just like remembering there's a world outside, activities like yoga and mindfulness and journaling and grounding exercises, you know, whatever works for you.

Those are all really good coping mechanisms. And maintaining perspective, right? And that's like a little bit of a different kind of mechanism, but, you know, we get very stressed in the moment and sometimes taking a step back and saying, you know, there are going to be many moments, some are going to be positive, some are going to be negative, right? How important is this one moment? Am I putting too much weight on it? You know, so getting perspective of the moment and also getting perspective of the journey, right? So I make an effort, I make a very conscious effort to step back often and say, "I'm super lucky to be doing this kind of work." If 15 year old me could look at me now, I would be very happy with what I get to [00:18:00] do on a day-to-day basis.

And I think we lose sight of those kinds of things in the day to day. So it's about maintaining that perspective about, you know, the moment and about the larger picture.

**Ellie:** So true. I feel like I never thought of that before, you know, what would my eight year old self say if she knew where she was going to end up. I have never, ever considered that in my life.

And I feel like that that adds so much grounding that a lot of us don't have. We just keep thinking that it's an uphill trajectory and we forget about the progress that we have made and where we have come. I wanted to follow up about the social interactions part because I'm an extrovert, I really crave social interactions. And so we're hopefully coming to the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, although I'm not going to jinx it. But during the height of the pandemic, when we were all in lockdown, especially in New York City, how, I guess my question is how would you advise graduate students that are craving that social interaction, but are faced with the [00:19:00] limitations on social interactions imposed by COVID?

**Judith:** Yeah. So this has been really, I mean, we've heard a million times, this is such an unprecedented time, but in terms of that kind of challenge, it was really, you know, really a real challenge to our social lives. And, you know, I'm the opposite. I am an introverted person and I would rather sit with a book any day of the week than go out to, you know, a get-together.

But that being said, if I haven't seen people in a while, it affects me. Like, I feel it, right? So like, you know, I need to feel grounded with people in the community. And I think, you know, we found some really innovative ways, right? Clapping from the balconies and singing from balconies.

That was a way of sort of being in this together and having some feeling of togetherness. And I think we showed a lot of resilience as a, you know, as a whole over COVID. Then especially in terms of the socializing and finding these ways and, you know, we doubled down on doing these tele pieces of things on Zooms and everything like that. And it wasn't ideal, but it [00:20:00] was a lot better than not. And I, I think that that's, you know, there's so much that people were doing - Zoom games and Zoom watching videos together and you know, those kinds of things. I think that's a way to create that togetherness.

And even when you're tired of that, or even if you don't want to pick up the phone to call, the gains, the benefits of it really, really pay off. So it's, you know, throughout COVID, I've been saying, and I agree, I hope we're getting to better times here. You know, I've been saying it's about being creative in how you interact with people and pushing yourself even when you don't feel like it.

You know, I looked at my kids and I saw at the very beginning of COVID, they created these games that they did on Zoom with like their cousins and, you know, they did it with cousins who live in different countries, which they'd never done before. And it actually brought them closer to people who hadn't been in their life, right? So I feel like, you know, you can use the opportunity to try and also during COVID, like it was such a strange time. It wasn't strange to reach out to people you had lost touch with and say, "Hey, how are you [00:21:00] doing this time?" Right? So you could use it as an opportunity to sort of double down on relationships and reach out to people, you know, so I feel like there were opportunities there, it's just a matter of creating those opportunities and making the most of them.

**Nina:** As Dr. Cukor points out here, social distancing doesn't have to mean social isolation. Though we may be states or even continents apart due to COVID, we can still speak to those that we love and care about. As an example of the innovation we have bringing us together during this crisis: Netflix Party. It's a fun Chrome extension that allows you to watch Netflix with other people. And in case you're curious, no, we're not being paid for this plug but who doesn't like watching TV with their friends?

**Ellie:** Absolutely. I think I also noticed that I would reach out to people that I feel like I had drifted apart from and wasn't really in contact with, but COVID is such a ubiquitous thing, right? That it was almost like an excuse, I guess? And so one thing that I wanted to ask about for sure, is like the ultimate taboo I [00:22:00] think in mental health, which is therapy. And so I wanted to ask, what can therapy do for graduate students? I think a lot of graduate students, especially incoming ones, or ones that are pretty young in their PhD journey are often confronted with, "Should I be in therapy?" You know, and this goes along with like the red flags discussion that we had earlier, identifying the red flags and knowing whether or not you actually go through a mental health struggle. But what can therapy really do for graduate students? I know that oftentimes there's like a free 10 minute consultation with some therapists that they offer.

But therapy can often also be a big financial investment. And so, I'm wondering if you could speak to what can therapy do for graduate students and what does it look like? What are the benefits and what would you want a listener who's considering therapy to know if it's right for them?

**Judith:** Excellent question and I think I'll start with your comment about it being taboo. And I think, you know, again, looking for silver linings of COVID, maybe this [00:23:00] is one thing, one piece of growth that we can have from this pandemic is I think that we've talked about the mental health crisis a lot more.

We've acknowledged the fact that people are struggling. I think, you know, workplaces have gotten used to checking in on how their employees are doing. So I think we work for creating a different language where we can acknowledge that mental health is a huge, you know, important piece of things for everybody.

And it shouldn't be taboo. So hopefully that's something that we can continue doing. In terms of therapy, 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 [00:24:00] 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 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 [00:25:00] 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.

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.

[00:26:00] So there's a whole bunch of ways that therapy can be helpful.

**Ellie:** Great. Thank you so much for outlining that. I had a question about how do you know if a therapist is a good fit for you?

**Judith:** So that's a very important thing, right? Because so there's different, there's different types of therapy, different modes of therapy, and different schools of thought.

So that's one piece of it, but you really have to feel comfortable. I say you have to click with the person, because you really have to sort of let yourself be vulnerable, be open about everything or you won't benefit as much. You also have to respect the feedback the person is giving to you.

And so, you know, when people are looking, you can sometimes get a vibe, but it really comes down to sitting with that person you know, over Zoom or whatever it might be, and just feeling like whether that click can happen and giving it a little bit of time, because you're not going to feel naturally, you know, that comfortable the first time.

But I think it's about feeling like, is this process working for you? Is this helpful for you? And do you feel comfortable with that person, and open [00:27:00] to their feedback? That's really important.

**Ellie:** Gotcha. Yeah. I think this passing the vibe check is really important, as a therapist.

Pushing a little bit about how much time should we give a therapist, for example, for us to feel comfortable with a therapist. Because like I said earlier in the preface for this question, therapy is a financial investment. So it's kind of like there's this ticking clock in a sense or ticking wallet, basically, where I think people may have problems of knowing like, "How much longer should I wait to see if I'm comfortable with this therapist?"

Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Judith:** Yeah. I mean, I can't give an exact number, but you know, there are very real considerations involved. So, you know, I would say, sometimes you can ask your therapist, like, "Can you describe to me just how do you view this and what steps might be taken?" Sometimes it's helpful to ask, you know, what the plan might be.

You know, I think there's an assessment period and then there's like, you know, when you start to get into things, so I would give it a few sessions at least, but I don't think it's [00:28:00] necessary to stay with someone for a few months if it's not feeling helpful for you.

**Ellie:** From your point of view, as psychologist and what you have seen, do you think that mental health services should be required for institutions to offer, specifically graduate research level institutions, and what are some of the barriers to making that a reality if so?

**Judith:** So this is a really difficult question and I'm not going to do it justice here, but I'll give you my very basic thoughts, which is, you know, I am a huge advocate of mental health services and I think access needs to be a priority. And so graduate schools need to help their students gain access.

The hard question is how? Is that in-house or is that, you know, locally and in garnering the resources of the community? And it's a super challenging issue with many considerations, right? There's economic, there's confidentiality issues. There's whether a school can have the infrastructure for a rich mental health service, right? And there's the quality of the services that can be accessed on both ends. You know, and again, just speaking individually, we have [00:29:00] worked really hard to increase access where I am, we've quadrupled the size of our care team. It's still extremely challenging and there's many considerations.

It's something I'm incredibly passionate about. I think most people say like, "Yes, we should have access." And you know, where I am, the leadership is very passionate about it as well. We can look outside of the graduate school, I think in our country we have a mental health problem in terms of access.

This is something that has not been figured out and needs a lot of more attention. So I guess, you know, it's a vague way of saying we need to do well by our students and we need to help connect them. I think employers are looking at this too, right? So, you know, what's employer's responsibilities to their employees?

Do they have EAPs? Do they need more robust services? Should they have mental health on site? So there's a larger conversation than just graduate school. But I think, you know, my bottom line would be to say that access needs to be a priority, figuring out what the best way is to get students access to great services is the important [00:30:00] part and figuring out the logistics of that needs to have a lot of attention to that.

**Nina:** A moment ago, Dr. Cukor mentioned EAPs. If you're unfamiliar with the term, EAP stands for Employee Assistance Program counseling and it's designed to help employees manage personal and workplace challenges.

**Ellie:** I agree. I am wondering what is informing their decisions in terms of these institutions thinking, "What should we do for our students?" Who are they asking these questions to?

**Judith:** I can't speak for the larger piece. I know that, you know, we are in constant communication with our students.

I know that our students' governmental body surveys the students and they present that to us and that has been a huge factor in us making the case for needing more services. So I think the students themselves, when they're able to communicate what the need is and what their, you know, what the problems have been, I think that that's a great voice.[00:31:00]

And then it's a question again, of the logistics of knowing that that's something that needs to happen, how can it happen? Where can we access, you know, not just services, but really good services for our students, right? We don't want to just throw something at them that's not going to work. So how do we get them really good care? How do we do it enough? You know, economically and logistically and confidentiality viable way where it's really in the best interests of the students. And I think those are some of the factors involved.

**Ellie:** That's awesome. I think it's great that the institutions, at least in your experience, are listening to the students and are asking the students specifically what would be best.

Do students, though, come forward and say, "I would appreciate it if this mental health service is provided by the institution"? Because I'm just wondering if this is kind of going in line with the whole taboo of mental health.

I'm just wondering in your experience, is there a changing culture? I feel like as a Gen Zer or Zilennial or whatever it's called, we're pretty outspoken about mental health or at least relatively speaking to other generations. And so my question is, are you noticing a [00:32:00] shift where students are actually being really outspoken about these issues that they may be facing?

**Judith:** So, again, I don't know what's happening on a larger level, but I am noticing exactly what you're saying. I do think it's important to have survey data so that students can speak up anonymously. I think it's important to have mechanisms where students can talk up without being identified about what those needs are, but I think that, especially in this generation, people are very willing to say like, "No, this is something that we know everybody's experiencing. We're going to be the ones to talk about it. And let's talk about what we need." And I think that's really elevated the conversation to a new level, which has been wonderful.

**Ellie:** Absolutely. And going in line with what we discussed earlier about what therapy can do for you in terms of behavioral strategies, what are some effective time management strategies that have worked for students that you've seen in the past? I think time management is one of those skills that we need to master in graduate school in order to be successful or at least feel successful.

And so what are some strategies that you've given your students?[00:33:00]

**Judith:** Yeah, I think I agree with you. I think it's really key in graduate school to have good time management strategies. I also think it's really important for life. You know, I think life tends to get messier, right?

So like maybe you have a family and so time management, I think, always ends up being an issue. And so, you know, a few things that I think are important to think about in terms of time management, the first is about being aware of what your priorities are, right?

So, you know, instead of putting out fires and just working on the thing that's right in front of you, you want to step back and create your own agenda, and think about what you need to do. And if you have decided that something's a priority, you want to make sure you're actually making time for it.

And I actually saw a quote and I can't remember her name. I saw a quote, where somebody said that when she wakes up in the morning, she doesn't check her phone first thing, because what that does is when she checks her phone first thing, it's just everybody else's needs get put on her agenda as the priorities. Instead, first she takes a little bit of time to think through what she needs to get done and [00:34:00] then she goes ahead and then checks her phone and sees what else there is. So I think, you know, in a small sense, right? We want to look at what our priorities are, but also in the larger sense, so if we really value family, right? But we haven't actually called home in four weeks, right? Then like, you know, that's a priority that you're sort of ignoring. You want to think through what's important to you and make sure that you're hitting all of it. The second thing I'll say is compartmentalizing. And we tend to use that as a negative term, but I think it's a really important tool for time management.

Compartmentalizing means "I'm going to work on this thing and only this thing, and I'm going to try and attend to it without any distractions", right? So, you know, I'm very aware of the fact that I'll be working on a manuscript. And I'm like a trained rat. Like my email will beep and like, without even thinking, I've already gone over to my email, like read through the email, and then determined it's not really that important. And I go back to my manuscript and it takes me like 10 minutes to get back to the flow of what I was writing, right? It's a very inefficient [00:35:00] system. So, you know, compartmentalizing means saying for an hour now I'm just going to work on this paper and I'm going to like, mute my emails and I'm not going to look at my phone every time it lights up, right? And we do this in other times, right? So when I'm sitting with a patient, I don't check my phone. We're able to do it when we're not allowed to. So it's a matter of telling yourself, "I'm just going to attend to this. And then when that hour is over, I'm going to give myself, you know, half an hour to look at my emails and check things and then have a 15 minute break."

But like, I'm going to give time for all of those things, because otherwise I can't shut it out, but for right now, I'm going to block out those distractions and work on this, so I think compartmentalizing is really important. I think being realistic in your expectations is really important. So in terms of time management, but you want to be realistic in what you can really get done and give yourself the time to get it done and not say like, okay, I'm going to write that entire manuscript in these next two hours, right? You want to be realistic and set realistic goals, and you want to schedule in breaks, you know, small and large, like we talked about before, and the last thing I'll say about it is you know, many students [00:36:00] talk about, issues of procrastination. And I think that goes to time management also is that like, if you just don't get into something or you don't do it, it's only harder to sit down and do it later because now you feel like you're already late with it. You're not going to be able to do a good job. So then you procrastinate more and procrastination is a huge thing that grad students deal with. And again, something that's very common. And one of the techniques that people have found most helpful that I've spoken to is, you know, they suggest doing 15 minute increments.

So if there's something you've been putting off, telling yourself, "I'm just going to sit and do this for 15 minutes this morning." And the reason why is because if you tell yourself you're only doing it for 15 minutes, then there's no expectation that you're going to do a great job with it, right? So like you're not talking about perfecting it.

You're just talking about like starting it and that's a lot less overwhelming, but once you've started it, right? You know the next day, it's a lot easier to get moving on it because you're already done 15 minutes worth. You already like, know what you have to do next. So you want to sit down for your 15 minutes. If you want to sit for longer, you can, but don't expect of yourself to do that.

[00:37:00] It's a little trick to get ourselves moving on those things. So if you find that there's a project that you haven't been working on, you know, just telling yourself tomorrow morning, I'm going to get up and I'm going to work on it for 15 minutes. And then the next day I'm going to work on it for 20 minutes.

Just giving yourself, you know, that permission to just step away after 15 minutes, it becomes a lot less overwhelming. So I think that's a technique that people have found helpful.

**Ellie:** Is it weird that I've already thought in my head of how to incorporate these strategies? This 15 minute rule is, I think, potentially really breakthrough-y me, like very helpful, because at least for me, I have a to-do list and I have checkboxes.

And if I start on something and I don't check off the box, it freaks me out. It's like, "Oh no." And so if I know that there's something on my to-do list, an empty checkbox where it's going to take a really long time to do it, I'm just going to push it off. I'm going to push it off because I'm like, it's an investment of my time.

And so I think this is an excellent strategy. Thank you so much for sharing that with us and our listeners.

**Judith:** Yeah, sure. So it's less rewarding when you don't get to do the check [00:38:00] mark because you know,

**Ellie:** Yeah exactly!

**Judith:** Of course you're going to choose the ones that are like shorter and quicker.

**Ellie:** Exactly!

**Judith:** It isn't always the most helpful thing. So yeah.

**Ellie:** Exactly. I think also I, instead of just having, you know, my check boxes, I'm just going to write like do 15 minutes of this. And so, you know, in 15 minutes, I'll be able to check it off regardless of if it's finished or not.

**Judith:** Yeah, exactly.

**Ellie:** Dr. Cukor, so helpful!

**Judith:** It's about working towards the goals. It's not just about finishing the goals, right?

**Ellie:** Exactly. Exactly. It's about the journey, not the destination. And so another question that I wanted to ask is one that we've we touched on a little bit already, which is dealing with imposter syndrome and feelings of failure and inadequacy when experiments don't pan out, when we don't do on a lab meeting where we feel like we're, at least in my case, I feel like I am the least knowledgeable in the room.

And I feel like everyone has more degrees than I do and more fellowships. I'm just wondering, what advice do you have for graduate students [00:39:00] that are feeling those feelings?

**Judith:** Yeah. I'm so glad you brought up Imposter Syndrome. I think, for those who aren't familiar with the term, right? It means feeling like you don't really belong, that like somehow you got there, but like you're not as smart or as good as everyone else in the room. And, you know, it's just a matter of time until they figure it out. And this is something that graduate students don't talk about.

They feel it and they don't talk about it. And so they don't realize that it's such a common thing. 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 more rare, 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 [00:40:00] 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 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. And I think the other part of it is also the acknowledgement, we talked about perfectionism for a minute before, the acknowledgement that we also don't have to be the best at everything, right? So, you know, we don't have to be the smartest in the room or the most charming in the room or, you know, everybody has their own skill set. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses if you were excellent at everything, I don't know, people would probably hate you, right? Like that's just too much, right? [00:41:00] We all need to have our weaknesses. That's just a reality. 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.

Just do what you've been doing because they've already invested in you.

**Ellie:** Absolutely. And I think it's especially challenging in a research environment where, you know, everyone is here because they were the best where they came from, or they were the smartest in the room and now everyone was at some point the smartest in the room. And so it's like this hypercompetitive environment that really feeds into a lot of cases of Imposter Syndrome.

**Judith:** I'm really glad you said that. It's a phenomenon that we see in many schools, right? Which is that you've worked really hard to be the best, you know, in undergrad and everything.

And then you get into a room with all the people who have been the best, then you're like, [00:42:00] "Wait a minute, maybe I'm not the best here." But at that point, like I think we need to step back and say, "You're all fantastic", right? That's what matters. And that's why you're here.

And keep that as the key. I think that's a really good point.

**Ellie:** Absolutely. And so one of my final questions is touching back on the mentorship relationship, it’s not a traditional case of employer or boss and, you know, employee. It's a very unique relationship that we have with our PIs as graduate students and as postdocs even.

And so one thing that I think has come up in anecdotal evidence is this feeling like your mentor wants you to go into academia. And so what advice do you have for students who may not want to pursue an academic career route, despite pressure from their mentors who are in academia, right?

And are biased and want them to pursue that path? How can students really cope with those expectations to pursue a career, especially with one that has pretty [00:43:00] low job security, relatively speaking? Do you have any thoughts on this?

**Judith:** Yeah. So I have thoughts there, you know, I'm not a scientist, so they're not from that perspective.

But I think you're absolutely right that this is a very unique relationship: the PI-student relationship, the mentor-mentee relationship, you don't see it very often in other kinds of spheres. One of the things I think we can liken it to, is sort of a parent relationship, right? And if you think about it, often parents have expectations from their kids and you know, they think they know the best way for their kids to be successful.

And they're very invested in their kids and they want them to be successful. And so they push them in the direction that they think is the best thing for them, right? And I think it's the same thing with the PI, right? The PI has invested not just time, but like they're invested in your success from an emotional standpoint, usually, as well.

And I think, you know, they might have ideas that is different from the student's plan. And those ideas are probably based on lived [00:44:00] experience and wisdom and very real things. But just like the parent-child relationship, it's the student's life, right? And they need to go through that process of differentiation and that's okay, right? So at certain points, you know, when you're growing up, you tell your parents, "No, actually I think this is a better path for me", or "I think I want to go to this college", or "I don't want to do you know, whatever that, that thing is that you're suggesting", and that's what makes you grow up and, developmentally, that's appropriate for you to grow up and try things differently than what your parents want.

And I think it's the same thing here, right? That, you know, career choice is a question of values and different kinds of priorities. And it's okay to disagree with your PI. That's the process, I think. We need well-trained people in all sectors and in my mind, I'm a fan of pursuing passion and what you're excited about and what you'll be excellent at wherever that may lie.

So I think, you know, there's no objective right or wrong. I think the key is to own what you want. And then to try to [00:45:00] communicate that with your PI in a way that's respectful and respects where they're coming from and their wisdom. So it's not combative and not judgmental of their career path and being like, "I would never want to do what you do!", right? Because you know, they've invested in that career path also, so it's not just about you, it's about what they do. And you want to try and explain to them why you're doing this, but at the end of the day, I think it's about knowing yourself and owning that decision.

**Ellie:** Exactly. I think reminding ourselves that it's not the PI's life, right?

It's yours. And it's your decision to make and not the PI's. I feel like those are really important reminders. My final question is one totally off-script and I'm really curious about, because I think there's been so much controversy around it, especially recently, but what were your thoughts on Simone Biles as we mentioned earlier, withdrawing from the Olympics. What maybe can graduate students take away from her withdrawal?

**Judith:** I think there's so much that we can learn from her. So the first thing as I brought it up before, I think it was just that self-awareness, right?[00:46:00]

You know, this was a very public decision that she had to make, right? And, you know, she was able to step back from all of it and understand herself well enough to know, like, this is not the right thing for me and this could be harmful to me. And I think that's an incredible strength to be able to do that.

I think it also speaks to the power of, you know, expectations. Right? So it's interesting that, you know what she said, or what it sounds like to me is she had so much external pressure on her. So many expectations of others that she had to meet. Now there's no doubt in my mind that Simone Biles holds herself to a very high standard and has very high expectations on her own, but it wasn't that. It was the weighing down of everybody who was putting those expectations on her. And I think there's a lesson there from her and I think it's really relevant to graduate students, right? Remember your passion for science and you know, everybody around you, there will be outside expectations. That's part of life. But we want to use that to motivate us. We don't want to use it to paralyze us. And I think what she was [00:47:00] saying was like, you know, every athlete in the public eye has their own internal expectations, but they also hopefully get motivated by like the fervor from the outside.

And she was able to say this moment, I'm not feeling motivated by this. I'm feeling paralyzed by it. So it's a reminder for ourselves, I think, to keep those expectations, you know, in line with where they need to be and keep them in perspective. And I think it's important to sort of understand when those red flags are popping up and understand what you need to do.

Sometimes, you know, stepping away fully, sometimes might be the answer. Sometimes you can do a sort of hybrid where you're able to access resources or access support without stepping away. Sometimes it's stepping away and coming back for the next competition, right? So I think, you know, I think what she's modeled for us is like self-awareness and being aware of what you need in that moment for yourself.

And I think we can all learn that lesson from her.

**Ellie:** Absolutely.

I think one more thing I want to add on that hopefully connects a couple ideas that we've already expounded [00:48:00] upon so far is that there were physical manifestations of this paralysis, right? She had the twisties, I think it's called in gymnastics talk, where she wasn't able to distinguish between up and down.

And so those external pressures and the detrimental effects that those had manifested physically, right, in her behavior. And I think it's important for us to remember that when pressures that we may face or the mental health struggles that we are trying to face start manifesting physically into those red flags that we talked about earlier, that's when we seek help.

**Judith:** That's absolutely a red flag, right? When we're physically feeling it. I definitely agree. It's absolutely when we want to seek help and, and I'm just going to encourage people to reach out to people. You know, I keep talking about accessing support and resources, and that means mental health resources, but also, you know, I've seen too many people who are struggling and don't tell people around them about it. And telling your family or friends or peers or whatever, like, "Aw, this is really stressing me out." Even if you're not comfortable being [00:49:00] entirely honest about it.

That's where you can get some fantastic support, right? That's where people can sort of be like, "Really? Cause you know, I'm really impressed by this." or "Yeah, I was super psyched out about that", right? Like it's just, it's very helpful. So, you know, locking it up deep inside is just not a, you know, not a helpful technique at all.

**Ellie:** Absolutely. On that note, thank you so much for being such an amazing guest, Dr. Cukor, the tips that you have gave already significantly improved my thoughts on mental health and also, the strategies that you gave were so incredibly helpful for me. So thank you so much.

**Judith:** It's been a pleasure.

I really enjoyed talking with you about this and it's really a pleasure. And I think it's great to give attention and focus to this.

**Ellie:** Absolutely.