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Women's Mental Health:
Answers to Common Questions

Thank you to our panelists for their amazing contributions,
continued hard work, and dedication.

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What is mental health, and why is it important?

- Mental health is the well-being, wholeness, or "shalom" of the heart. It is recognition that we are a body with a soul, a soul with a body. We cannot compartmentalize health and think it is simply an affair of a body "functioning at its best," but also recognize our bodies are always in partnership with head and heart- there is no duality.
- Mental health IS health, and quite honestly, two words that I hope we continue to normalize and grow comfortable talking about openly. Mental health includes many pieces of who we are – from our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. As we know, mental health doesn't only impact us as a person, but it also impacts how we think, feel, and act regarding ourselves and those around us. It's important to get comfortable with your mental health and where you are in your journey (and yes, it will fluctuate, and that's normal!) – so you can understand how you react to yourself and those around you.
- This is not a clinical definition, but from my perspective, mental health refers to our emotional, spiritual, and social well-being. It is important for many reasons, but we mainly deserve a happy, productive life. We need to take care of our mental health so that we can live the life that we deserve.
- An individual's mental health relates to their psychological well-being. A positive state of mental health is important to an individual's daily life.
- I recently came across a podcast that shed some light on mental health. The guest, Dr. Paul Conti, a psychiatrist, shared an interesting perspective. He said mental health is about how much gratitude and control we feel in our lives. I've been thinking about this, and it's helped me understand my own mental health better. It's not just about our emotions; it's about how we see the world, live our lives, and handle stress.
- Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. It affects how we think, feel, and act and helps determine how we handle stress, relate to and interact with others, and make choices. I think it's easy for people to focus on physical health because it feels more tangible at times, and yet, our mental health encompasses so much of who we are.

What are the common symptoms of depression and anxiety? How do you know when the symptoms require professional help?

- One can be irritable, "on edge" for no reason, exhausted, or over-functioning- there are a lot of associations with depression (such as sadness) that are understood in popular culture, some not so understood (irritation, annoyance, doing too much, etc.). We assume depression is something folks can "get over," but there is no silver bullet to "fix it." We do best when we are patient with it, offering ourselves compassion first and foremost. Depression/anxiety might very well serve as a kind of invitation to examine our lives further to see what it is that needs healing- it is often a sign that something that once "worked" for us as a coping mechanism is no longer providing the results we remember. From my

perspective, I want to make clear that depression/anxiety is NEVER a sign of faithlessness or degeneracy. For those who believe in the Divine/Higher Power, these experiences are INCLUDED in a life of faith, not apart from it.

- There are national institute definitions for each of these (persistently feeling sad or empty, irritability, frustration, or restlessness). What I think is important to note is that everyone is different. According to the Indiana University School of Medicine (2021), anxiety disorders occur twice as often in women than in men. Social and cultural factors likely play an essential role in the development of anxiety in women. I am a personal advocate for seeking help and support before you reach a “breaking point.” What I mean by that is that you start to think to yourself...this may be too much – that’s when you should seek support. I often remind myself of this. I don’t only get to see my therapist when my days are rough or life seems hard; I go even on the good weeks – because it’s part of true self-care.
- I am not a medical professional; however, speaking from my personal experience, I sought help when I couldn't function in my day-to-day life as I had before. For instance, I remember feeling hopeless and distraught--these feelings didn't go away as I went through my day. I remember feeling like I would never feel better again. I couldn't get off the couch. To go for a walk was too big of a task. My loved ones witnessed these behaviors and helped me seek treatment. I'm happy to report now that my depression was ultimately temporary, and I am now happy in ways that I never imagined I could be :)
- Depression - feeling of sadness; anxiety - feeling of fear; when feelings do not go away on their own and persist for an extended amount of time.
- Firstly, everyone has some anxiety and some depressed mood at times. I think it fosters resilience to look at depressed mood and anxiety as signals that may be communicating important information to us, trying to get our attention. If it's getting hard to get out of bed, to accomplish the things aligned with your values, if you start isolating, if it begins to impact your sleep-- I think all those things would justify checking in with a therapist. We truly don't need to be in the depths of despair to benefit from therapy.
- Common symptoms of depression include having a depressed mood most of the day, having less interest or pleasure in most activities, having a significant increase or decrease in appetite or weight, struggling to fall or stay asleep, or always wanting to sleep. Some people feel slowed down and may feel fatigued or lose energy. Individuals may have feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness, excessive or inappropriate guilt, low self-esteem, struggle to think or concentrate, or be more indecisive than usual. Some people also have recurrent thoughts of death or thoughts of suicide. Depression is more than just sadness. The difference between sadness and depression isn't just HOW sad a person feels. Still, it's a combination of factors relating to the duration of these negative feelings, other symptoms, bodily impact, and the effect on the individual's ability to function in his or her daily life. A specific situation, person, or event typically causes sadness. Depression doesn't need a specific trigger, and with

depression, a person tends to feel sad about everything. A person with depression may lose the ability to experience joy or pleasure. Common symptoms of anxiety include excessive anxiety and worry about a variety of topics, events, or activities that are difficult to control. Individuals with anxiety also feel restless or on edge, may feel more tired than usual, may have difficulty concentrating, and may have irritability. They may have muscle tension or soreness, have difficulty falling or staying asleep, or wake up feeling unrested even though they have gotten enough sleep. Excessive worrying occurs when there is no specific threat or the worry is disproportionate to the actual risk. The anxiety can make it hard to carry out day-to-day activities and responsibilities. To know when to get professional help, the best place to start is if you feel bothered by the symptoms and/or you can't handle the symptoms on your own. Another way to measure is based on the criteria we use for making diagnoses: do the symptoms cause you clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning? If you feel like you can't function adequately in your own life in some way, ask for help.

I'm a 40-year-old, successful career woman in a happy relationship with children, but I have not been myself lately. I feel like I find the negative in everything. I want to feel happier. What are your suggestions?

- This can be an invitation to consider what grief you might carry that you're not addressing. Grief is an everyday part of human existence. As researcher Brene Brown has pointed out, it's an essential experience to witness if we want the experience of joy- they come together, with both needing to be acknowledged in their turn. We can be grateful and grieve at the same time- the experience of sadness (negativity and irritability can be indicators of grief) coexists with the good things in our lives. Grief can cover a range of things, from the loss of a close relationship or death, but it can also be ANY experience of loss, big or small. This includes watching children grow older, friendships evolving/changing, becoming a new identity for us, etc.
- First and foremost, be sure to give yourself grace in this stage of life (and in all stages). Just as when we are infants and morph into teenagers and adults, etc. – our level of care and needs assessment look different. Life looks different, and what used to not stress us out before or overwhelm us may be different now. So, breathe and acknowledge that it is okay. I would also recommend identifying the things that do bring you joy. Maybe you can't go to the beach/sunshine every time you feel overwhelmed – but you can certainly step outside and take 5 minutes to breathe in the fresh air or take a walk.
- Communicate with loved ones and with people who are in similar situations as you. Doing this can help you find community. Also, be curious about your "negative thoughts"--don't judge them, inquire--why am I finding this negative? What triggered this negativity? When is this happening? Etc. Doing so might help you see patterns in your thoughts. Share all of this with trusted loved ones!

- Early intervention is key. The first action would be to talk with someone. Other actions would be to utilize protective factors such as good nutrition, exercise, and a good social support system.
- Not to sound overly cynical, but it takes a lot of effort and intentionality to avoid being completely dragged down by life in middle age. I have a few built-in reflective practices that help me to reset. One is the quarterly life review I do 3-4 times yearly. Here are the questions I answer:
 - What is going well? Why is it going well? Are there any major wins?
 - What are areas for intentional growth?
 - What would I do/have/be if I had \$10 million?
 - Am I spending my time hunting antelopes or hunting field mice? (Am I wasting a lot of time on little things?)
 - What are areas of stagnation?
 - What would it look like if it were easy?
 - What would it look like with 15% more joy?

Most, if not all, of these questions come from the Tim Ferriss podcast. They are important questions to consider a few times a year and have helped me make important acknowledgments and adjustments. "

- One of my favorite books is Learned Optimism by Martin Seligman, the father of positive psychology. He has written several books that focus on increasing feelings of optimism, happiness, and fulfillment, and they have been meaningful in my own life and the lives of many of my clients. One easy way to feel happier is to focus on the things that have happened in your day and take time to appreciate those things. Having gratitude for what has gone well is a helpful way to refocus toward optimism. Setting aside a few minutes every day to write down some of the positive things from that day can be beneficial. Sitting down with your loved ones and allowing each person to share something joyful that they did or that happened to them can be helpful, too.

Sometimes I feel sad. It doesn't take much for me to start crying - a small comment or even a blink of an eye can set me off. It seems like all the sadness and stress from my past and recent frustrations have hit me all at once. Sometimes, it takes me days to snap out of it. I try to appear happy at work, but it's not always easy. Do you have any tips on improving my emotional balance and state of mind?

- This may be an invitation to explore what this sadness means in your present with a trusted confidant or therapist. Grief isn't something we "grow out of," but rather grow with- it hits us in strange times when we least expect it and will hang around as an unwanted guest until we extend an invitation for it to sit with us awhile. Rituals can also be an important part of a grief process: if a particular event or loss creates sadness, how can you honor this in your present? Rituals

can be formal or informal: I once met a woman who went to New Orleans every year on a short vacation to celebrate/remember the loss of her best friend during her 20s, and for others, the ritual might mean a visit to a service of worship, a walk in the woods, or something meaningful to them. Rituals might also help us honor our current frustrations. I keep a box where I write down everything that is frustrating me and keep it there for months, tucked away. This helps me name my fears/grief/frustrations and witness the passing of time- as it goes by, some items I wrote down no longer hold power over me than they once did.

- Girl, me too! A great deal of last year felt this way for me. I was frustrated because last year had some high moments, but the low moments were very low. Again, show yourself grace in this. Sometimes, it's easier for us to say we are stressed because of our jobs, spouses, kiddos, etc. – but we don't do the hard work to look deeper into what that means. Let's take work, for example: is it the daily tasks you're doing at work that cause you to be stressed or perhaps a coworker? Maybe it's a lack of recognition or a lack of boundaries. In my opinion, I have found that individuals usually feel these emotions because it's something deeper. I would encourage you to sit with those feelings and write down your thoughts about those stressful situations and past frustrations. Perhaps you haven't processed them fully, and that's okay. Give yourself patience and grace to do so.
- Be curious about your sadness. Why do you feel sad? What triggers it? How long have you been experiencing sadness? etc. Keeping track of your responses to these questions might help you see ways to improve your state of mind. Overall, be kind to yourself. You deserve to be happy and not just "appear happy."
- If the symptoms persist for more than two weeks, professional help should be sought; emotional balance and state of mind are different for every individual; early intervention is most important.
- Sadness is a signal to look deeper. It is not something to be shut down. Sometimes, life is legitimately sad, and trying to disconnect from sadness would equate to disconnecting from life. Also, we tend to layer shame over sadness (as in, what's wrong with me? Why do I always do this? Why can't I be different/tougher/stronger?). Then, we are left with a layer of sadness, buried under layers of shame and frustration, making the situation altogether more difficult to navigate. Instead, try to imagine that you are comforting a child who is sad or crying. This child needs comfort and kindness. I believe it is one of our noble goals in adulthood to show up for ourselves in the same way we would comfort this sad child. I'm also a huge fan of therapy, and when seemingly trivial things affect us, it is usually a signal to look deeper. These trivial things are like a window or a doorway to some hurt we haven't resolved or accepted. Exploring these trivial things with a therapist can help us to unburden over time.
- If it takes multiple days before you feel like you again, which happens repeatedly, I recommend talking with a professional. This may not be something you can fix on your own, and getting guidance from a mental health professional or talking to

your physician about whether medication might help would be the best course of action.

I am aware that I need to seek professional help from a counselor or therapist, but I am hesitant to take the first step. I have never opened up to anyone and fear letting someone enter my mind. Could you please guide me on how to overcome this fear?

- To start, a therapist is NEVER coercive and does not "force" anything out of a client before they are ready to take a step. The client sets the tone and the pace of conversation, always in strict confidence and with clear boundaries. It is scary to take this step, and it's also incredibly healing to have someone listen to us and take us seriously, wherever we are, at any given moment. There is no "mind reading," but rather a safe relationship that never asks for more vulnerability than a client is willing to offer.
- I love this question because this hesitancy is a real emotion when considering seeing a counselor or therapist. It can be hard to feel like you must open and let someone enter your mind. I often remind people – it's all about the small steps. On your first visit, you don't have to tell your entire life story (you totally can!) – just as you want to develop a relationship with your therapist, THEY want YOU to be comfortable. Acknowledging this fear out loud and to them is also a great place to start. You may be nervous more than once going to your session, but it can and will get easier. Small steps, my friend. You can do hard things, and you are thankful and proud of yourself for what you did.
- I had the same fear, and I resisted professional help for 10+ years. I always thought to myself, "I can handle this."--until I no longer could. I finally sought professional help when my mental health reached crisis level. It took a few weeks, but when I finally started feeling better, I constantly asked myself, "Why didn't I do this sooner." It might help to re-frame "therapy" to learn about yourself. You don't have to wait until you're in a crisis to learn about yourself. Just do it now to care for yourself!
- Understand that everyone is different based on their cultural background and life experiences. The fear of opening is common, and individuals should not feel ashamed. Finding someone close to you and whom you trust is the first step in recovery, as that person can help guide you.
- I think therapy is becoming so much less stigmatized and so much more accessible than it used to be. Think of therapy as a process of little bits of unburdening. It takes a little while to establish trust and rapport with a counselor. If you feel like it's not a good fit with your therapist, it's acceptable to respectfully cut ties with the therapist and seek out a different option.
- If you have a good relationship with your primary care doctor and trust him or her, they may be a good place to start regarding a referral. They usually know mental health providers whom they trust. You can also call some providers and talk to them briefly to see if they would be a good fit for you. It's good to consider if you have specific qualities you are looking for in a provider. Do you want someone

who feels more like a friend with whom you could converse, or do you want someone who would feel more like a nurturing mother? Maybe you want someone who will be blunt and keep it real. You may also want someone who specializes in important or meaningful areas, like someone who understands being a mother, someone from the same cultural background, or someone with the same sexual orientation as you. It's important to know that not every therapist or psychologist will be the right fit for every client, which is ok. Mental health providers know this and won't take offense if you don't think the fit is right. Mental health providers generally allow you to move at your own pace, so don't feel like you must pour out your soul during the first session. Talk about what you feel comfortable discussing; the rest will naturally evolve. We are trained to help people feel comfortable with us or to help them feel safe enough to talk about what they need to talk about. And then it's our job to help put our clients back together before they leave our offices, so they aren't miserable the rest of the day or week. Generally, one of the goals of a session is that clients feel at least a bit better when they leave than when they arrive.

What changes can I make to improve my mental health?

- There's a lot that can ail us. As a recovering perfectionist, I can speak to how too high an expectation of others (and ESPECIALLY) of ourselves can harm our wholeness (already given to us) and our understanding of our inherent worth. Mental health (and I include spiritual health with this) requires a capacity to confront reality as it is rather than how we would wish it to be: our limits, failures, mistakes, and general imperfection as humans need to be embraced, forgiven and looked upon with compassion. Not easy to do! There's no easy answer here, but any habits we can cultivate to let ourselves live into our imperfection with love and compassion (I highly recommend Brene Brown's "The Gifts of Imperfection" here) can only help. That means slowing down, allowing ourselves to disappoint others, forgiving our mistakes, and resting in the assurance that we are loved for what we are, not what we do or accomplish. This is difficult work.
- As I continue to evolve in my mental health journey, I have noticed many factors impact it – which makes sense, but I think I am becoming more aware of how those factors impact me in totality. For example, there are certain foods (sugar) that can make my mood tank, and then I get in a funk, which impacts my overall mental health. If I don't take time each week for myself to either walk, read a book, or chill out – it causes my mental health to decline. There are also some bigger things – home and the work environment. If you are in an unhealthy or toxic work environment, let's work to figure out how to change or improve that. Your mental health and overall well-being are too important, and you are too special to stay in environments that no longer serve you or cause you to shine. Same with home situations. Mental health improvements can be made on a small or large scale. Also, what works for your friend may not work for you. Some people love journaling or meditation – and that's not always my cup of tea. It's also important to share with those you trust and love when you aren't feeling your

best, or your mental health isn't the best. I speak for everyone in the room when I say you are loved, and some people want to support and love you through the tough times, so take those small steps to let them in.

- Be proactive with your mental health. Don't wait until you are in crisis to care for yourself!
- Good nutrition, exercise, a consistent life routine, and positive coping strategies are just a few actions an individual can take to improve their mental health.
- There's a lot of variety in what changes improve mental health for women. To highlight this variety, here are some of the strategies that my closest friends have mentioned to me in the past couple of weeks: joining a roller derby scrimmage squad; making new garden plans; planning a trip; trying a new training; establishing better boundaries about weekend time to assure the weekend is restful; taking a tap-dancing class; reading a book about how to do better with small talk; reading a book about how rest is a form of resistance; getting a dog; hiring an intuitive eating coach; scaling back on a side hustle; resolving to take power naps; getting up earlier for a bit of morning solitude; going to yoga classes more regularly, limiting social media consumption to only-in-the-bathtub. Some common themes might include regular joyful movement, prioritizing good sleep, pursuing meaningful work, enjoying a creative outlet, enhancing friendships, and spending time outdoors.
- Before making any changes, I think stopping and assessing your actions is important. Sometimes, it's not about making changes as much as it's about saying "no" more, recognizing that it's ok not to do it all or not to do all of it well, and giving ourselves some grace. Sometimes, the changes we need to make are recognizing that we are already enough and need to have better expectations for ourselves. Regular exercise, getting enough sleep, eating well, and decreasing stress are important for health and mental health. Still, those aren't always practical, especially if we work or go to school, care for our homes, raise children, care for parents, and spend time with our partners. And if you add the "extras" like spending time with friends, attending events, or volunteering, life can get really exhausting. While many of these things are fun and/or rewarding, sometimes we need to rest, and stop being overstimulated by life. Our society isn't designed with this concept in mind anymore, so we must force ourselves to focus on that. I think it's why we now hear so much about mindfulness in a way that we used to not. I think levels of mindfulness were naturally more of a part of daily life before most people's lives became so constantly busy. Now, we must schedule time for a practice that used to just organically exist.

How do you overcome the fear of failing so that it doesn't impact moving forward in jobs, relationships, and life?

- The good news is that you WILL fail and make mistakes, so perhaps your first step is to accept this as something that can't be avoided (some good news, huh)? Self-compassion towards failure is a potent resource, but it is also SO HARD to connect with. I love the work of Kristin Neff, who essentially says that a)

making mistakes and being imperfect is a universal part of the human condition- it's not just you b) you have to talk to yourself as you would a beloved friend or partner, and not as a bully c) mindfulness, or living fully in the present, can help you to keep from being overwhelmed by any hypothetical "future" that you don't possess. If we are so afraid of failing, we can't live. Take it one moment at a time and know that everyone else (literally) on Planet Earth is struggling alongside you. The people who seem to have it all together. That's an illusion- maybe even an illusion to themselves.

- This is something I used to be so afraid of - because, growing up, we may have heard the phrase "failure is not an option." I have stopped telling myself this and those around me (it's a constant work in progress) because failing shouldn't have such a negative connotation. Making mistakes, messing up, or failing is how we learn. I always feel best when I know I am in a safe space to fail, and I actively look for work environments, relationships, and life experiences that support or understand that "failing" is part of life.
- Try to re-frame "failing"--instead of "fear of failing," think about "failing forward." I consult this resource a lot:
<https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1623252873/lwsdorg/f8fmcwplqze4he8bwdrq/Failuremaynotbefun.pdf>
- It is not uncommon for an individual to have some fear. Positive self-talk, controlled breathing techniques, and a positive social support system can increase self-esteem and self-confidence to cope with this fear.
- I was in my thirties before I was introduced to the work of Carol Dweck on growth mindset. Because the growth mindset was a concept, we would be teaching our First Year 101 students, I dove in to fully understand it. I recognized a very fixed mindset in myself. For your knowledge- a growth mindset understands that we need to practice things to improve, and a fixed mindset is a belief that you are already supposed to be good, knowledgeable, skillful, and savvy at things "naturally." According to a growth mindset, when we feel the pain and friction of being challenged, our brains make new neural connections. In a fixed mindset, this pain and friction represent inadequacy and inability. If I could return to my freshman year of HC self and impart one bit of wisdom, it would be related to a growth mindset. It makes me sad to think that I believed that I was supposed to be a perfect, finished product when I arrived at HC. I would hold her sweet 18-year-old face, stare into her eyes, and say, "Sara, dear. You are here to grow! Ask your questions. There is beauty and courage in your effort and the small risks you take. The challenge you feel, the inner friction you sense, is your brain getting stronger!"
- I think one of the important things to know about failure is that it shouldn't be seen as a result, but it should be seen as a point in time where learning and growth can occur. When failure is identified as the result of the finish, it becomes far scarier because it is seen as finality, like death. When it is seen as an area where growth can occur, there is less reason to fear it. While growth doesn't often "feel good," it is important, and we know that. Growth is a goal or should be

– something to strive toward instead of trying to run away from. When we become less fearful, we are more willing to take risks.

Are there any tips or resources that you recommend that address living with high-functioning anxiety? How to overcome it?

- I am one of those people- I'm not sure "overcoming" is a useful response- that feels like a lot of pressure! I wonder if this can be framed as "How do I have compassion for my anxiety," and "What can I do to soothe and center myself when I am feeling overwhelmed?" It's a bit like harm reduction- the hope is to adapt coping strategies slowly, but looking for a "cure" feels harsh and paralyzing, at least to me. In times of overwhelm (of which I have plenty), I try to think about how my body feels instead of letting my brain race around like squirrels in a coffee shop. What sensations do I get when I am overwrought? Do my cheeks flush? Does my heart race when I feel that happening? How do I take some deep breaths from my belly? Do I have a trusted person I can talk to that I can be vulnerable with AND who will help de-escalate the situation? Can I get some exercise in that moment of anxiety, or do something that will slow down the overstimulated brain squirrels (knitting, coloring, heck, even doing laundry)? Outside of those moments, what expectations do I have that are not realistic (hint: my ridiculous expectations are often aimed at me)? What stories/narratives have I learned about my worthiness that no longer serve me? What stories/narratives do I have to release or let go of slowly? A therapist (or even a spiritual director) can be a wonderful guide for those larger questions.
- Many (free) apps exist that can help calm or ease anxiety. Everyone works through and lives with anxiety in different ways - I will encourage you NOT to get discouraged if what works for someone else doesn't work for you. Also, acknowledge that what may have worked for you before may not work now - and that's okay.
- My anxiety is generally about control (my anxiety increases when I perceive that I lack control in a situation). So, I recommend reflecting on what you can and can't control. Try to put your energy into things you can control instead of putting your energy into things you can't control.
- There are different forms and levels of anxiety. A mild level can be helpful in day-to-day life. Increased levels or persistent forms of anxiety that affect a person's activities should be discussed with a provider. Protective factors, controlled breathing, and a good social support system can be helpful in overcoming these symptoms.
- "Oh yes! Some helpful books include The Gifts of Imperfection by Dr. Brene Brown, The Anatomy of Anxiety by Dr. Ellen Vora, Off the Clock by Laura Vanderkam, and Daily Exercise/Joyful Movement. A yoga practice that includes training related to breathing. Engaging in therapy and exploring some of the old hurts that you experienced or witnessed that created "never again" energy in your system. Improving our ability to show up for ourselves in times of distress

with self-compassion is very important, too. Criticizing and shaming ourselves adds extra layers of difficult emotions without any benefit.

- High functioning anxiety is how many of us find motivation and push through difficult moments. This is certainly how I got through graduate school. The challenge is that when anxiety overtakes you, you feel like you have less control over it. That's when it no longer works for you but can cause you to feel overwhelmed and prevent you from being able to do things or stay motivated. Having good coping mechanisms and ways to de-stress is important because you need to keep your anxiety from moving beyond your productive threshold. Exercise, quality sleep, and spending time with people who make you happy help keep your anxiety below that threshold.

How does stress affect us mentally and physically?

- Thankfully, we have many options in how we respond to stress: life inevitably gives us problem after problem, so it's not something we can escape from, but rather can learn to manage and "converse" with. It's unrealistic to assume that we can eliminate stress, but we CAN develop habits of mind and heart that help us cope with this. Perhaps a terrible stressor would be to carry the expectation that we're supposed to be stress-free! Going to another point, stress (according to systems theory) can either be acute or chronic. Acute stress is the house on fire, the difficult diagnosis, the "we need to do something right now, or someone will die or be gravely harmed" kind of stress. Ironically, that isn't as damaging in the long run as chronic stress, our "equilibrium" of stress that we are accustomed to carrying, created by real and imaginary things. The amount of chronic stress is something we do have control over, though it is a very vulnerable (and stressful) thing to reduce this anxiety that we "get used to" in our lives.
- Stress can impact us in various ways. Some ways stress can impact individuals are that it causes them to be less energetic, lose their appetite, lose their appetite, want to be less social, increase risky behavior (smoking, drinking, actions), you may feel more sad, self-conscious, etc.
- I am not a clinician, but when stressed, I experience sleeplessness (either trouble falling or staying asleep). My lack of sleep then impacts my ability to be present in all situations--work, family, etc. If I haven't properly cared for myself (adequate sleep, hydration, food), I start negative self-talk (you're not a good teacher, you're not a good mom, etc.). So, stress can start a snowball effect in other important areas of your life.
- It may prevent us from enjoying the things that we normally find pleasure in; it may prevent us from completing activities of daily living.
- Chronic stress is not good for mental or physical health. But short-term stress, or stress about positive things ("eustress," think stress related to a presentation, job interview, planning a party, a performance review, etc.), can be good for us. It strengthens us through the experience and makes the next "stressful" experience more manageable.

- According to the Mayo Clinic, common physical effects of stress include headaches, muscle tension or pain, chest pain, fatigue, change in sex drive, stomach upset, sleep problems, and getting sick easier due to a weaker immune system. Psychological effects include anxiety, restlessness, lack of motivation, difficulty focusing, memory problems, feeling overwhelmed, anger, and sadness. Stress can cause us to overeat or undereat, seek unhealthy foods, misuse drugs or alcohol, use tobacco, avoid friends, and decrease exercise.

What is mindfulness?

- This one has a thousand definitions, but the Buddhist tradition includes mindfulness in their Eightfold Path, comprised of essential spiritual practices to help the faithful confront reality. Nirvana is not a space of total oblivion transcending a difficult world but an embrace of reality in its multiplicity, without judgment. In other words, what's being transcended is our resistance, striving, or "wishing that things were different." We often hear that mindfulness is "full presence," often practiced through breathwork and meditation. In this full presence, we do not attempt to change ANYTHING in our reality but accept it as is, without resistance. I'm tongue in cheek, but for those of us who hear the constant thumps and twangs of construction on campus- if we sit with that noise and let it coexist rather than curse the time it takes for sewers and HVAC systems to be constructed, the more "mindful" we become. I'm not suggesting that Sarah Crafton incorporate these noises into her yoga sessions, but this is the hope of this spiritual discipline.
- Mindfulness is a technique you can learn that involves noticing what's happening in the present moment without judgment. You might take notice and be aware of your mind, body, or surroundings.
- To me, mindfulness is about being present--when you are talking with someone, not thinking about the past or the future, but just listening and being present with that person. I see mindfulness as a skill--it's not something that some people have but rather something you can practice. Here are a few tips on practicing mindfulness: <https://www.mindful.org/how-to-practice-mindfulness/>
- Being aware of self
- Mindfulness is doing things with intention and attention. It's where your feet are. Simple in theory. Difficult in practice.
- Mindfulness is about being in the present moment without judgment and focusing on your surroundings and all your senses (taste, smell, vision, hearing, touch, and proprioception (keeping track of where your body parts are in space)). When engaging in mindfulness, you will likely use breathing techniques, guided imagery, and meditation to help relax the body and mind and reduce stress.

What does self-care mean?

- Self-care is another big word in the consciousness of popular culture, so I get a little wary of using it for fear of the assumptions placed around it. I like the term "self-compassion" better, as I see it as gentleness, which we offer ourselves as we live through the tough experience of confronting reality. "Self-nurture" might be another good choice, or even "self-parent." Imagine our adult selves speaking to our younger selves: how do we comfort and care for the children we have inside? This might mean some mundane (and unglamorous) stuff like seeing a therapist or getting a mammogram. It can sometimes mean ice cream, too, but self-compassion/nurture/parenting is not escape or indulgence; the ultimate goal is to build resilience and grow. What's missing here is the other component of care, which is care through the community. It's unrealistic to assume our needs for growth/resilience/nurture can come only from us: this needs to come from "systems" of relationships, whether we're talking family, friends, the workplace, public policy, etc. We need advocates and accountability partners- we're also inherently social creatures that require community. We must talk about both things together!
- Self-care can mean different things to everyone. For some, it's a spa day, pedicure, or eating chocolate. For others, it may mean getting out of bed and showering when they feel sad or ensuring a healthy meal. It's important to understand that self-care is a way to take care of YOU for YOU.
- I see self-care as specific and personal. That means what "self-care" is for one person may not be "self-care" for another. I follow lots of "self-care" Instagram accounts. One post that I saved is "What's your Self-Love Language?"--we often think about how to care for and give love to others, but we don't think as often about what forms of self-love we prefer! My self-love language involves acts of service for myself (scheduling, cleaning--things that make me feel in control!) and quality time (by myself--going to the library to check out a book and then walking to the coffee shop to read for 30 minutes--all alone :) So, think about what "fills your cup" and make a list! Prioritize doing those things that fill your cup!
- Any action that improves our mental or physical well-being.
- I've got to include this great article by Brianna West called "This Is What Self-Care Really Means Because It's Not All Salt Baths and Chocolate Cake." She writes: "True self-care is ... choosing to build a life you don't need to escape from regularly." This article is so good. I shared it with some colleagues years ago, and it still comes up in conversation occasionally.
- Self-care is taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve your physical and mental health. It is important because it can help you manage stress, lower your risk of illness, and increase your energy. Self-care includes regular exercise, eating healthy, eating regular meals, staying hydrated, prioritizing sleep, engaging in relaxing activities, setting goals and priorities, practicing gratitude, focusing on positivity, and staying connected with friends

and family who are good for you. It's also beneficial to laugh frequently, keep a sense of humor, set aside time for hobbies and passions, and write or draw in a journal.

How do I learn to set boundaries in the workplace respectfully?

- "Boundary" can sound like a wall or an imposing fence intended to keep people out, but it's exactly the opposite- they are there to build relationships and make it possible "to care for other people and me at the same time." They are so hard for those of us brought up to be people-pleasers (cough, cough), but this goes back to self-compassion again: how do I honor my well-being as much as anyone else's? How do I care for myself the way I care for others, knowing that I can't do one without the other? My faith tradition has a theological claim on that, believing that the commandment "to love God and to love my neighbor as myself" means that I must love and honor all three to love any of these. Hard to practice? Absolutely. Clear communication can be helpful here, letting folks know (without justification!) what to expect or not to expect. For example, if I'm on vacation, I leave an email informing me when I will return, with the clear statement, "I will not be checking email at this time." Then I DON'T check my email. If this frustrates people, I did what I could, to be honest. If I kept checking my email, I'd resent the time I'd otherwise be spending reading a bedtime story to my nephew or having a long walk on the beach with my dad. Because I treasure those relationships, I need to be off when I'm off, giving them my full attention. When I return to work, I'll be ready to return and not exhausted. I love Nedra Glover Tawwab's "Set Boundaries, Find Peace" as a resource.
- Boundaries. Aren't. Bad. Say it louder for those in the back - boundaries aren't bad. Saying no isn't bad. Walking away from things that no longer serve you isn't bad. It's important to note that and work to believe that before you can respectfully set boundaries in the workplace. Those who go above and beyond often get more and more work put on their plate. I would recommend being honest and transparent with your supervisor/mentor about the boundaries you have in place. Remember, you can be both honest and kind when letting them know what you need to have in place to protect your time and peace.
- This is tough, and I know I'm not the best person to answer this question! I also need help respectfully setting boundaries. A lot of times, we don't know what our boundaries are until one is violated! So, when you feel that a boundary has been violated, please write it down, think about it (or, better, talk about it), and plan how to avoid this boundary violation in the future.
- A smart surgeon who is prone to over-working himself told me once to do in a day only what you can come back and do again tomorrow. I thought that was great advice. I try to take a long view of my work life, knowing that if I burn myself out, I won't get to work in my wisest years! I have learned to schedule my days with my Outlook calendar and utilize Microsoft Bookings, which does some boundary-setting for me. With my calendar, I can block out times as needed, require 15 minutes between appointments, and block out my lunch hour. I have

adopted a "schedule tight, then schedule light" approach to my work week. I block time on Fridays to fit in an urgent situation before the weekend if necessary. I also get a lot of little tasks, as well as planning, done on Fridays. I have also been fortunate to work for great supervisors who prioritize family life and healthy habits.

- Setting boundaries can be difficult if you haven't had them in the past, but they are important. You can be nice about it, but clarify what times you are available for work and how best to reach you. Also, set expectations, such as "it may take me two or three days to respond to your request." Please do not make yourself available all the time and in all ways of communication because there are no boundaries, and people will overwhelm you with their expectations. If you only work part-time, put your work hours in the signature line of your emails and automatic replies. Expect that some people will still try to push your boundaries, and in each case, you must decide if you want to make an exception. And if you do, be prepared that someone else may try to use that exception to their advantage.

What health habits can women incorporate daily to improve their mental health?

- Breathing deeply! It can happen at any time. Breathe through the belly, not through the throat. Movement is also fantastic- if we feel tense in our body, get a walk- it doesn't have to be an intensive workout, but to calm the body down in a language it can understand. Dancing is also terrific, of course! No talent is needed.
- Here are my suggestions, and these don't have to be radical changes - start small in the incorporation of these:
 - Make sleep a priority!
 - Eat and drink in a way that is healthy for you!
 - Exercise your body and mind!
 - Step away from work and focus on self-care!
 - Have safe (emotional and physical) and healthy relationships!
- There are lots of options here, but here are a couple that have been good for me:
 - Journaling: I have made my own (bullet journal) and used already made journals (one of my favorites is "Today with Intention: A Guided Journal for Reflection, mindfulness, and Self-care). I find it helpful to begin and end each day with intention, and journals help me do this. One of my favorites (and easy) things to do daily is a mood chart to keep track of my daily mood. This is a great way to see patterns in your mood and learn a little about yourself!
 - I sometimes scroll on Instagram. I began "liking" self-care posts, and now they fill up my feed! A simple Instagram post can serve as a daily affirmation or give me an idea for a simple act of self-care. One of my favorite accounts is "**myselflovesupply**" :)
- Good nutrition and exercise!

- Daily joyful movement, prioritizing good sleep, and remembering to breathe deeply are all very important. My favorite health habit, though, is called the Friday Afternoon Tidy-Up and Plan-Ahead. This strategy comes from a helpful book called *Off the Clock* by Laura Van der Kam. Here's the process:
 - Block out the last hour of your work week every week.
 - Tidy up your workspace, such as taking out your trash and doing your dishes, so your office feels welcoming on Monday morning when you return.
 - Reflect on your week's accomplishments and write a summary of your week in a notebook or planner.
 - Revisit any messages you have not yet responded to and respond so there aren't neglected tasks hanging around your brain all weekend.
 - Look ahead to next week and identify any problems that will make you feel rushed or stressed. Try your best to move things around a bit. If people know in advance, moving a meeting by a few minutes or even another day isn't too problematic.
 - Lastly, identify three goals/intentions for these categories: Self, Relationships, and Career. Write them down where you will see them on Monday morning.
- Getting regular exercise, eating healthy, regular meals, staying hydrated, prioritizing sleep, and engaging in relaxing activities such as meditation, yoga, massage, reading, or knitting are all habits that can help with your mental wellness. It's also important to set goals and priorities and determine what needs to be done now, what can wait, and what to say "no" to. I appreciate what you have accomplished at the end of the day. Practicing gratitude and writing these down or replaying them in your mind is beneficial, as is focusing on positivity and challenging your negative and unhelpful thoughts. It's also important to stay connected with friends and family who are good for you and can support you. Be a listening, nonjudgmental ear.

What overarching messages about mental health do you want to share?

- Self-compassion is such an important practice. This is the root of much spiritual wisdom from so many spaces. We can only be imperfectly human, and this is not a curse.
- Mental health impacts everyone, and it isn't anything to be ashamed about. Different seasons and challenges in life bring different chapters of mental health, which is okay.
- Be curious about your mental health. Be proactive instead of reactive. Be kind to yourself. You deserve as much kindness as you extend to your own loved ones.
- Don't be afraid to talk to someone. Educate yourself.
- Health and Mental Health often run on parallel paths. If I'm excessive" in my head," I need to get back into my body- with good breaths, leading yoga classes, working out, listening to birds, hugging loved ones, and taking walks. I know that

this is overly simplified. This seems to be true for me in this stage of life. I also think therapy is great and helpful. As a therapist, I have learned to view emotions as signals, and I have learned to respond compassionately to my students. It's nice that this practice sometimes makes its way into personal application.

- Giving yourself grace, having gratitude, and knowing that asking for help is not only ok but is important. It's so easy to think that everyone else is doing everything better than us, but that's rarely true. Everyone is struggling with something. Everyone has something hard for them or can't do. And when our burdens are more than other people's or feel overwhelming or hard for us, we need to reach out and allow others to support us.

How would you support a colleague when they are having an anxiety or panic attack at work?

- I would listen calmly and ask them to breathe with me. Panic attacks (I've had these) require grounding in the physical space around you, determining what you can hear, taste, touch, smell, see, etc.
- In this type of moment, everyone needs different things. I would sit near them so they were not alone and ask what I may do to help. Often, we don't know what we need - but support is a big piece. I would help the person focus and calm their breathing - keeping interactions simple and brief in a caring way.
- Ask what they need. Listen. Let them know you are there for them and that the attack is temporary. Here's a good resource for this question:
<https://www.healthline.com/health/how-to-help-someone-having-a-panic-attack#accept-the-confusion>
- My suggestions:
 - Assess for safety.
 - Listen nonjudgmentally.
 - Give reassurance.
 - Box breathing.
- Stay grounded (feel your feet on the floor) and monitor your breathing. Let your breaths be even and steady because your colleague's breathing may mimic yours. Ask them if this is something familiar or if they have had this happen before. Sometimes, a person having a panic attack may feel like they're having a heart attack, as some of the symptoms are the same (shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness). If a person tells you that they have had panic attacks before, then you can be more certain that a panic attack is what's happening.

Don't ask the person questions that are difficult to answer. Stay calm, knowing that a panic attack usually peaks and dissipates within 20 minutes or so. Sometimes fresh air, a drink of water, or touch can help, but ask a person first (Is it ok if I put my hand on your shoulder? Would you like a drink of water? Would you like me to help you get some fresh air outside?) Sometimes, people prefer to

be left alone, and sometimes, they prefer to have someone with them. It's ok to ask (I know sometimes people like for someone to stay with them... is this preference?)

I have recently learned from an excellent book called *The Anatomy of Anxiety* by Dr. Ellen Vora that panic attacks are sometimes a result of a big fluctuation in blood sugar levels, and I have found this to be true with many of my students. For example, a student has a large sugary coffee and doughnut for breakfast and then goes to class. Their body produces insulin to manage all the sugar in the bloodstream. The student can't eat anything else for a couple of hours as they're in class or a lab or whatever... This fluctuation, perhaps along with some stress related to class, a text, or something else, can send a person's system to panic.

I think that sharing this perspective with students can help destigmatize panic attacks and instead paint them as a situation that can occur when the circumstances are right, and often, we can mitigate these circumstances by making different choices (i.e., making sure we get some protein along with sugar, or avoiding excessive amounts of sugar on an empty stomach; carrying snacks and water; becoming aware of how much caffeine our system can tolerate and the body's signals that we've had too much).

- It's helpful to try to be in a quiet space with them that isn't overwhelming or overstimulating, if possible. It's important not to say too much but to be physically present and sit with that person. Asking someone repeatedly if they are ok when they are struggling with anxiety or a panic attack is going to be counterproductive even though, now, that is what you are going to want to do. Try to be calm, take slow, deep breaths to help them physically see someone else doing that, and see if they can tell you what else they need. If you want to say something, reassuring phrases like "You are ok. You are safe" can sometimes be helpful.

Are there any tips or resources that you recommend that address living with high-functioning anxiety? How to overcome it?

- As in a previous answer, "overcome" puts undue pressure on us to "defeat" something. Paradoxically, anxiety will have a lot more hold over us if we attempt to eliminate it rather than gently sit with it and be curious about what it might be telling us. Insomnia runs in my family and is something I'm very familiar with- it's exactly those moments when I've said, "I HAVE to get to sleep NOW because I have to do x, y, z first thing in the morning!" that I could not get to sleep if my life depended on it. I feel sleepy again when I stop fighting and forget about falling asleep (going into another room to plan a menu, reading a favorite novel, etc.). I feel that anxiety is exactly this way.
- Same as # 8: My anxiety is generally about control (my anxiety increases when I perceive that I lack control in a situation). So, I recommend reflecting on what

you can and can't control. Try to put your energy into things you can control instead of putting your energy into things you can't control.

- High functioning anxiety is how many of us find motivation and push through difficult moments. This is certainly how I got through graduate school. The challenge is when anxiety overtakes you, and you feel like you have less control over it. That's when it no longer works for you but can cause you to feel overwhelmed and prevent you from being able to do things or stay motivated. Having good coping mechanisms and ways to de-stress is important because you need to keep your anxiety from moving beyond your productive threshold. Exercise, quality sleep, and spending time with people who make you happy help keep your anxiety below that threshold.