

## Podcast Transcript

**UNMC Chancellor Jeffrey P. Gold, MD:** Today my guest is Dr. Sarah Fisher. Dr. Fisher is an assistant professor of psychiatry here at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Dr. Fisher is a psychologist at the Aspire Clinic, that's the Active Support for Psychosis and Recovery Clinic, and she's also UNMC'S director of wellness programming.

**Dr. Gold:** Thanks so much for joining us today. The subject for our discussion is stress. Different types of stress.

**Sarah Fischer, PhD:** Yes.

**Dr. Gold:** And as you may know, there was recently a major report released that studied over 90,000 undergraduate students in the United States at over 130 different universities, small colleges, large colleges, public colleges, land grant, universities, private institutions. And the stress level was, I believe, if I recall the report, 47% of the students said they had stress and/or anxiety. It was just an astounding number. So, let's talk a little bit about, what are the effects of stress? And how do we become more self-aware?

**Dr. Fischer:** Absolutely. Yeah. I think it's helpful to start by talking about sort of the different kinds of stress, right? So, we've got acute stress, right? And so, these are things that tend to be more time limited, right? So, a relative is passing away, you have a really difficult exam coming up, right? These kinds of things.

**Dr. Gold:** Flat tire.

**Dr. Fischer:** Yes, a flat tire. Exactly. And then there's chronic stress. And so, these can also have an environmental cause, right? A toxic work environment or difficult home environment or financial stress. But sometimes it's also the result of not being able to cope with stress effectively. And chronic stress is really where you get into the biggest problems typically. So, chronic stress can have a really big impact on your physical health, right? Impacts your immune system, your cardiovascular system, your digestive system. It also has a really big impact on your mental health. So, generally speaking, your mental health will suffer if you're under a lot of stress for a long period of time. And if you have a tendency toward experiencing a mental illness, you'll be more likely to have that emerge or to have a relapse in those symptoms if you're very stressed out. So, it's really important to be aware of stress, because it has a really big impact on your mental and physical health.

**Dr. Gold:** So, you know, this blend between short-term and long-term stress. I mean, I'm going to guess if I were to walk through the campus and ask 25 different people, students, faculty, staff, visitors, guests, et cetera, whether there's stress in their lives, I'm going to guess the overwhelming majority are gonna probably say yes.

**Dr. Fischer:** Absolutely.

**Dr. Gold:** And so, from a self-awareness perspective, when do you think or how do you think one can be better self-aware?

**Dr. Fischer:** Yeah, that's a really good question.

**Dr. Gold:** Meaning when does it get to the point that you either need stress reduction, treatment or perhaps change some of those major factors in your life?

**Dr. Fischer:** Yeah. I think there are two main things that you want to keep an eye on. One is sort of level of distress, right? So, at what point is this impacting your emotional health to the point where it's not sustainable. So, are you noticing that you're crying every single day, right? Are you noticing that it's really, really hard to get out of bed, right? Are you noticing that you're much more impatient with people, right? And you have trouble regulating other emotions outside of stress, right? So, kind of noticing the emotional impact of the stress that you're experiencing, but then you also want to kind of notice how is this impacting your actual life? Like, practically speaking, right? Are you turning things in late? Are you having fights with your spouse? Are you having a really hard time keeping your household organized? What are the ways that stress is impeding your ability to live your life the way that you want to be?

**Dr. Gold:** I understand that there is such a thing as good stress. Is that right?

**Dr. Fischer:** Yeah.

**Dr. Gold:** And certainly from a purely physiologic perspective, people talk about the "fight and flight" responses to stress. So, talk to us a little bit about what is characterized as good stress?

**Dr. Fischer:** Yeah. And it's interesting, you can actually think about, there's kind of two forms of good stress, right? One is the good stress that people talk about where you're kind of stressed out for that test and that motivates you to study harder, right? Or you see something dangerous and that kicks in your fight or flight, and you run away successfully, right, and you avoid danger. And so,

we do experience stress for a reason. It can be helpful for our survival, for our success. It's when it gets out of hand that it's a problem, right? But then I also like to think about good stress in terms of positive changes in your life. That with those changes come a lot of stress, right? So, getting married, having a child, starting new job, these are all really wonderful things, but they're also very stressful. Because you're having to make these huge life adjustments. And so I often will talk to people who almost feel a little bit guilty for feeling anxious or stressed. You know, these are wonderful things that are happening to me. Why? Why can't I just be happy? And it's like, well, it's also very stressful. And so, taking extra care to manage your stress during those times is important too.

**Dr. Gold:** You know, it's so interesting. I have a pretty serious case of what is known as imposter syndrome. And I can't believe that, you know, a kid who grew up in the inner city of New York ends up as the chancellor of a great university like this. And to have the opportunity to do things like create these podcasts and truthfully, that causes stress.

**Dr. Fischer:** Absolutely.

**Dr. Gold:** I think about that a lot. I try to convert it into something positive. And I try very hard to be self-aware. But I still can't seem to recover from the syndrome.

**Dr. Fischer:** Absolutely. Yeah. Well, you're not alone in that one. Imposter syndrome I think impacts pretty much all of us.

**Dr. Gold:** Well, you know, we're very privileged here at the med center because we are highly respected by the communities that we serve. And people look to us for advice. They look to us for not just health care, but they look to us as to how we act and how we care for the communities broadly across the state and in the region. And the last couple years, let's face it, with the pandemic, have been pretty tough.

**Dr. Fischer:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Dr. Gold:** So, let's talk a little bit about self-care and what is the role of self-care and perhaps is there a borderline beyond which self-care is probably not going to work.

**Dr. Fischer:** Yeah. So, self-care can mean a lot of different things to different people. It's become fairly popularized. I'm sure you've noticed. And I think it's

been capitalized on a little bit by some brands and organizations that want to sell things, right? Like do a face mask, that's self-care. And that certainly can be, right, but it's much more than that. Self-care to me is a very foundational, making sure that your physical and emotional health needs are met so that you can fully function, right? So, this can mean moving your body a reasonable amount. It can mean eating nutritious food, getting enough sleep, because when you think about it, the primary role of self-care is to reduce your level of vulnerability to experiencing very intense responses to stress. If you kind of think about if you're exhausted and you haven't eaten all day, and you have a physical health condition, right, that hasn't been treated, under those conditions, you'll be much more likely to have a hard time dealing with stress than if you are well rested, you've eaten enough, you have all your physical health care needs taken care of. And so, to me, self-care is almost primarily preventative. It sets the stage, it kind of creates the foundation for being able to cope with stress effectively. And to have stress impact you a little bit less.

**Dr. Gold:** And I know, having worked a lot with Dr. Wengel over the years, he's a strong believer in the role of very simple things like meditation and just getting grounded in your day. And maybe you talk a little bit about that and how that could be part of self-care, because I've actually learned from Steve and try to do it every day.

**Dr. Fischer:** Yeah. Absolutely. Well, one of the main things that those can do for you is, you mentioned earlier awareness, right? How do you become aware that you're stressed out, that you're experiencing problems? And mindfulness and meditation is all about connecting with your internal and external experiences, right? And so when you do kind of like a mindfulness practice, for example, that does several things for you. One, is it something that you are doing purely for your emotional health? Right? It's time that you're taking for yourself. You've decided it's worth it to me spend this time on something that will be good for me. It allows you to really check in with yourself right when you're doing a meditation or a mindfulness practice, you're observing your breathing, your heart rate, your physical pain, right? You're being very aware of everything you're experiencing in your body. It also gives you an opportunity to kind of observe your thoughts. Like is there a particular kind of thought that's crossing your mind over and over? Is there a particular thing that you're very stressed about that, that you have a really hard time letting go of? And so, mindfulness can be a really good tool for just becoming more aware of "what is going on with me."

**Dr. Gold:** Well, this is a really important conversation because it's not just the undergraduate students that we've talked about in the recent survey. Certainly,

health profession students, faculty, staff, the impact of the pandemic as it's changed the workforce, the incredible need for medical care as well as behavioral health care across our nation and certainly in rural and urban communities, has been nothing short of catastrophic. And I'm so pleased that you're part of our organization, and I'm so pleased that you and Dr. Wengel and others are taking a very proactive response to this, that we destigmatize the conversations that we're able to have them not just on a podcast such as this. But more importantly in the workplace, in the clinics at home. I think it's not just self-reflection and meditation and mindfulness, but, you know, have that conversation with your significant other. Talk to your kids or your parents and say, you know, "how are you doing? And by the way, how do you think I'm doing?" And is this something that we should talk about, and I think those are very, very healthy conversations.

**Dr. Fischer:** Absolutely. Yes. The more that you keep things hidden, right, the less they are going to be addressed.

**Dr. Gold:** And by the way, I think hiding them or the opposite of that would be destigmatizing, the conversations is in itself a source of stress. If you are really afraid to talk to people, particularly those that you love, and care about you, with about the things that are really so important.

**Dr. Fischer:** Yeah. I think imposter syndrome is a really good example of that, right? Where everyone kind of feels like, oh, I can't talk about this because then other people will know that I don't deserve to be here.

**Dr. Gold:** Well, that's why I chose to mention it in something as, as public as a podcast, but I've said it many times before. So, this is a community that understands that fundamentally, Myers Briggs, that I'm an introvert and most people would never guess that. But the truth is, I really am. Thank you so much for joining us today.

**Dr. Fischer:** Of course. Thanks for having me.

**Dr. Gold:** Thank you for all that you do.

**Dr. Fischer:** Thank you.

**Dr. Gold:** Thank you for tuning into this episode of "Health Care Heart to Heart" with Dr. Jeff Gold. And until next time, stay healthy!