

**Podcast:**

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* Welcome to *12 Degrees*. I'm Lindsey Whissel Fenton. This episode is all about the emotional degree of wellness and what nursing students can teach the rest of us about building it. Self-talk might seem small, but it can shape how we handle stress, setbacks, and other hard situations. Reshaping that self-talk is a core part of MINDSTRONG, a program developed at Penn State's Ross and Carol Nese College of Nursing. In this episode, 12 degrees only, Dr. Christina Lightner, an assistant teaching professor at Penn State, switches from co-host to guest to share what research reveals about how we can build resilience and support mental health through simple, evidence-based strategies like reframing, emotional regulation and positive self-talk. Let's start big picture. When you think about emotional wellness in the context of nursing students or health care training more broadly, what comes to mind?

*Christina Lightner:* I think of resilience, self-awareness, and then also having the tools to manage both the intense emotional demands of the training. But then also of their clinical practice when they get into practicing. And so, our students often carry heavy academic load. They have to learn to navigate complex clinical situations. Oftentimes, you know, the problems that happen in clinical often are internalized by health care providers. And so prioritizing emotional wellness is essential for their academic success and then also for their sustainability in the profession.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* And when you say internalized, you mean like when providers blame themselves for patient outcomes, even when there might be many other factors at play?

*Christina Lightner:* Exactly.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* Gotcha. So, we're going to talk about where the MINDSTRONG program comes in. But give us a brief elevator pitch of like what is MINDSTRONG?

*Christina Lightner:* MINDSTRONG is a manualized seven-week cognitive behavioral therapy program.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* So, as you said, MINDSTRONG is grounded in cognitive behavioral therapy. Can you walk us through how the theory translates into real world emotional wellness tools for students?

*Christina Lightner:* Yeah. So cognitive behavioral therapy has that triangle how we think affects how we feel and how we feel affects how we behave. And all of them can impact each other. So, the program helps us to recognize the connection between our thoughts, our feelings and our behaviors. And MINDSTRONG takes us a step further into developing skills around that. So, for example, a student who is having a negative thought like, "I'm failing", they can frame that into something like, "This is hard, but I'm learning." So instead of all negative adding some positive to that. The simple shift can help to reduce our anxiety and also improve our focus. So,

## 106: Self-talk Matters: Building Emotional Wellness with MINDSTRONG

it's about building mental habits that promote healthier responses to stress. So, changing our automatic response...trying to make that shift from a negative thought pattern to positive and MINDSTRONG helps do this through skills building each week.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* What do you think makes MINDSTRONG different from other wellness programs?

*Christina Lightner:* So, one of the things that makes it different is that it is grounded in evidence. So, there's a lot of evidence around the program helping to decrease anxiety, stress, burnout and also depression. And then it also helps to develop a proactive strengths-based approach. And it can give students and providers that language and strategies that can be used immediately.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* And this was really cool, in your study about the mentoring program, nearly all participants, I think it was 96%, were using at least one healthy behavior a year later. That's a huge win. What do you think helped make these lessons stick?

*Christina Lightner:* So, I think it was the combination of timing, relevance, and reflection as well. So, we introduced the program during their early training, so in their second year and said this is a formative time and the skills are immediately applicable. And I think that the repeated practice that is embedded into the workbooks helps build muscle memory over time.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* That makes sense. And the most used skills were positive thinking and self-talk. Why do you think those are the two that rose to the top?

*Christina Lightner:* Students can face some self-doubt rather regularly, so learning how to coach themselves through those difficult moments gives them some empowerment, and it also helps them to show up with more confidence for themselves, their patients, their patients families, and then their peers as well. And positive thinking and self-talk are skills that are easily accessible. So, you don't need a whole lot of resources. It's just about awareness. But they're also skills that are touched upon every week. So, there's practice for them each week.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* And on the flip side, sleep and nutrition didn't score as high in terms of implementation, especially over time. What are the barriers there and how might we better support behavior change in those areas from what you observed?

*Christina Lightner:* So, sleep and nutrition are often the first things to go when people start to feel overwhelmed. We tend to not take care of ourselves as much. But there are also structural barriers, both in the clinical practice and making habits consistent can be difficult. So, to support behavior change, we can look at system level solutions like. One of the things that I started doing in my class is our learning management system has a default time of 11:59 p.m. for assignments to be due. And so, I always change the time to something like 8 p.m. so that we're not encouraging that culture of staying up till midnight, hurrying up and getting an assignment done. So, it's like those little things that we can do to help support our students,

## 106: Self-talk Matters: Building Emotional Wellness with MINDSTRONG

and then also having food accessibility. I know one of the things we do here on campus is offering like fruits and veggies. During finals week, we'll put like baskets out with bananas and apples. So, students can have a quick snack. So, it's about trying to promote that culture and valuing rest and nutrition and not just productivity.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* I really love what you mentioned with your LMS system in the time change, because that is such a great example of how somebody can implement that for the betterment of all in terms of community wellness. So, I love that. We've talked about changing our thought patterns and being kinder to ourselves and MINDSTRONG also involve sessions on problem solving, stress management, and emotional regulation. Which components have you seen make the biggest emotional impact on students?

*Christina Lightner:* I feel like emotional regulation is up there and having one of the biggest impacts. Once students can take control of their actions and their reactions, they can approach problems with a clear mind and have their mindset shift where they move from feeling stuck with a situation to feeling more capable.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* And interestingly, students with the highest baseline levels of stress, depression, and burnout often show the most improvement. Can you say more about that?

*Christina Lightner:* Yeah, it really is a helpful message that where it's needed most, it's helping. So, it shows us that our students are coping better and building a foundation for long term wellness and professional resilience.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* It seems like we talk about burnout a lot after people become professionals. But what struck me about the MINDSTRONG program is that it focuses on wellness during training. And you said early in training as well. How does early intervention change the game?

*Christina Lightner:* By introducing wellness early, we help normalize it, and we send a message that managing our mental health is just as important as mastering the clinical skills. So, our hope is that students carry this mindset into their career and helping reduce that burnout before it begins. Like you were saying, it is preventative care for the caregiver.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* This program and what you've done with it is amazing. What lessons from MINDSTRONG could help the rest of us?

*Christina Lightner:* We don't need to be in healthcare to benefit from the core strategies of MINDSTRONG. Practicing that positive self-talk, identifying unhelpful or negative thought patterns, and creating space for emotional processing can be beneficial for everyone. Everyone can benefit from learning how to pause, reflect, and reframe.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* And you talked a little earlier about creating a supportive environment with things like putting out fruit, making sure students have access to healthy snacks, and doing

## 106: Self-talk Matters: Building Emotional Wellness with MINDSTRONG

things to encourage healthy sleep habits. This is so important because wellness often gets siloed into individual responsibility, but your work really emphasizes culture. What does it take to build a culture of emotional wellness, especially in an academic or clinical setting? Or honestly, really any workplace?

*Christina Lightner:* Yeah, like you were saying that cultural change does require more than just an individual buy in. It takes commitment from leadership, and we're privileged at the College of Nursing to have our dean and our assistant deans and our leadership and our admin being on board for wellness. I know that's a big hurdle for a lot of people is having that leadership support and commitment. Also, modeling from faculty helps to build that culture of wellness and then integrating into both courses into daily life so that when students see that wellness is prioritized at every level, they're more likely to believe that it's essential and also achievable.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* If someone listening wanted to bring a program like MINDSTRONG to their school or organization, where should they start?

*Christina Lightner:* So, starting with a champion can be very helpful. So, this is someone who's really deeply involved in wellness, who cares and is willing to do the work to bring it in, and then connecting with others, partnering with someone who's done it before can also be very helpful. If you have that possibility, they can help to adapt the content to fit your population's needs so they can say, you know, like this worked for us. This didn't work for us. So, you don't need to reinvent the wheel. You can make it relevant for where you are.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* Well, you talked about having a champion. I know that you have been such a champion for wellness and the Nese College of Nursing and in our broader community with the work on *12 Degrees*. So, thank you for this conversation and for all you do every day in supporting wellness.

*Christina Lightner:* Oh, I thank you. I appreciate you so much.

*Lindsey Whissel Fenton:* That was Doctor Christina Lightner, an assistant teaching professor at Penn State and one of the co-hosts of our *12 Degrees* podcast. Her research focuses on emotional wellness and how cognitive skill building can help students manage stress and build lasting, healthy habits. I'm Lindsey Whissel Fenton. That's it for this episode of *12 Degrees*. To learn more, you can visit [wellness-dot-psu-dot-edu](https://wellness-dot-psu-dot-edu). Also, be sure to like and follow this podcast so you don't miss any of the upcoming conversations that will help you adopt healthy habits. Until next time we wish you good progress on your wellness journey. *12 degrees* is produced by WPSU in collaboration with the Penn State Russ and Carol Nese College of Nursing. This podcast is intended for informational purposes only and is not intended to be a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health care provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or mental health condition. Please consult your physician or other qualified health care provider immediately. If you are experiencing any suicidal thoughts. If you're in crisis, help is available for free 24-7 in

106: Self-talk Matters: Building Emotional Wellness with MINDSTRONG

the US by calling or texting The Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. More information is available at [988-lifeline-dot-org](https://988-lifeline-dot-org).

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]