

107: The Creative Degree

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Welcome to 12 Degrees. I'm Lindsey Whissel Fenton.

Christina Lightner: I'm Christina Lightner.

Deshna Nagar: And I'm Deshna Nagar.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: On this podcast, we explore real life strategies for nurturing the twelve areas of wellness that influence how we feel and function.

Christina Lightner: We share our own personal experiences and the research-backed strategies we find helpful and give thoughts for how you can adapt them for your life.

Deshna Nagar: In this episode, we're going to be looking at the creative degree of wellness and what we can do both at the individual level and the community level to support it. Christina, help us understand what creative wellness is.

Christina Lightner: Creative wellness encourages self-expression through artistic, musical, and other creative outlets. We typically think of things like painting, drawing, writing, or crafting. And those can be great forms of self-expression. But more broadly, creativity is problem solving and exploration and emotional expression in everyday life. But it can also involve play, which is something many adults don't get enough of.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: So, two things came up for me right off the bat, Christina, as you were explaining that. One being that we think so often creativity is about some artistic practice, but we can be creative in pretty much any realm of life. It's really a frame of thinking. The other thing that comes up for me is, Christina, in our first couple episodes, you've really emphasized finding what works for you.

And I am going to talk about artistic practices in this example. But I remember a few years ago, adult coloring books were all the rage. And I really tried to make that my thing. I had people gift them to me. I bought them for myself. One I found that I just really didn't like colored pencils, it's not my medium. And two, for whatever reason, it actually just stressed me out. I did experiment with some kids coloring books and that was a little more fun for me. But my favorite hack around this is actually I got into adult paint by numbers. I like to paint. I have no talent, but I enjoy it. And I would find, though, that sometimes when I was just staring at a blank canvas, that would feel overwhelming too. So, for me, I found a few paint by numbers that I will pick up and put down and just are fun, don't require too much of me, and do, I think, nurture that creative wellness.

Deshna Nagar: Something that I'd like to highlight about what you said is, just because you're not good at something doesn't mean you shouldn't do it.

Christina Lightner: Very true.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Yeah. I think that's also something we lose as we get older. Like kids are—kids will just dive in and try things. And I think we do fall into that trap of thinking there's no point if we're not going to be expert at it.

Christina Lightner: Yeah. And kids naturally engage in that imaginative play. But as adults, we often suppress that instinct. And so, I like the idea of the paint by number. It gives you some direction. Some other things that I like to do is where one person starts a drawing, and the next person finishes it. We do this with my daughter a lot. And one of the things that we'll do is fold a paper into three pieces. And she'll—one of us, and it's usually her—she'll start with drawing the head of the character. And it doesn't have to be like a human character, it could be like an animal or whatever's in her mind. But as the person drawing second, I don't see what she's drawing because she folds it over. But the necklines come down onto my section and so that I will draw the body. And then I'll fold my section down and make a place for the legs on her section, and then she'll finish the legs. And so, it's so fun to see the end product. It's always a surprise.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I love that.

Deshna Nagar: Me too. There was—I think there was this Instagram trend where you take a canvas, and then you'd simultaneously try to draw each other—like a portrait of each other. And in the end, you'd show each other the results. And I tried that with a friend, and she just drew the most atrocious picture of me. But it was really fun.

Christina Lightner: That sounds like a lot of fun.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: It does. And I love the laughter I can hear in your voice. And the continued picture was making me think of something I used to do with my nephews. Which is, we would end the night with telling a shared story like that, where each person would add a sentence, and you would go around and around until the story was complete. And that was a lot of fun too.

Deshna Nagar: There's also—I think there's so many tiny ways that you can be creative. One thing for me is just being creative with the words I use and being creative with my jokes. One more thing that I like to do is, when I'm trying to get to a certain place, I'll just take a different route than I usually do. And for me, that's being creative.

Christina Lightner: I do that a lot. I'll get off at different exits because I've already seen that exit yesterday. So, I'm going to just take this exit before my exit. I do that all the time.

Deshna Nagar: It really—I don't know, it makes me happy. It really does, I agree.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: And changing up your normal routine is a great example of easy ways to nurture your creativity. In fact, any time you mix up your routine, you're engaging your brain's right hemisphere. This could be as simple as even just brushing your teeth with your non-dominant hand. So great wellness and real-life hack for nurturing creativity is just mix things up. Another thing that's coming up for me is we think creativity has to be something we do ourselves. And I'm personally—I get really filled up by being around other people's creative energies. I am someone—I really enjoy home improvement. I'm a pretty darn good carpenter. I can do some other basic things. I can do some basic electric. Not great with plumbing, but I love that and it's something I grew up doing with my dad. It's something I really enjoy. And I didn't realize what a creative outlet that was for me until a few summers ago, I had sold my house, and I didn't have a home to work on. And that summer, I was going to every art festival that I could find or think of or drive to. And I didn't put it together until later, but I think I was really missing my own creative outlet. And I was getting that nurtured just by seeing what other people were doing or just—you know there's a certain energy when people are engaged in that creativity that I think you can soak in just by being around them.

Deshna Nagar: As you say that, I'm also wondering if there are spaces that we could be in, or just where we would get that exposure, that something come to your mind of being around other creatives so we are more creative?

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I mean, Central Pennsylvania is a wonderful place in terms of art festivals. Lots of communities have craft shows. And I always love those because I love seeing people talk about their work. I also like challenging myself to take pop up art classes again with things I am not good at. I took a pottery class at a local community creative center. And I over glazed the one mug. So, when it was fired, half of the glaze came off. So, there's blotches on this mug. And I had this thought of like, you know what? I am going to display this mug with pride because—I actually have a sign next to this that says it— that life doesn't have to be perfect to be beautiful and neither does the stuff that I make.

Christina Lightner: Yeah. And I like that you bring that up because lots of people have that fear of, oh, it's not going to be good enough, I'm not going to do that. And I love that you're displaying them in your house, I love that.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton Yeah. And in terms of other places to be creative, I know a big thing now is pottery centers where you can go purchase something. So next to my—I was going to say sad little mug, but it's not sad. I am proud of my spotty little mug. I also have—it's a dragon. I went with my friend and her two sons, and we went and painted pottery, and I was just looking at all the things available and it was like a cute dragon not a—it was like a cute little cartoonish, little kid dragon. And I was like you know what? I really want to paint that dragon. It was just fun. I was just there for fun. It's not going to win any awards, but it was great.

Christina Lightner: Yeah. And we also do paint your own pottery. My daughter loves that. So that's something that's in our routine of, OK, it's time to go do a paint your own pottery. And they give you a little tutorial when you come. Like this is how you do it. If you only put one coat on, this is what it looks like. So, they give you a walkthrough, so you're not just left to figure it out. And we also took—when we talk about community, we took a group of our nursing faculty over there about two Mondays ago. This Monday will be two weeks, so we're excited to get our pottery pieces back.

Deshna Nagar: I love pottery too, but it can get a little expensive for me.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: It is expensive.

Deshna Nagar: Yeah. And I try to find tiny moments of play with the people around me, especially my partner. So, he does this thing where—so I am a really tiny person, there's no hiding it. And he's huge. And so, what he'll do is when I'm feeling low, he'll just pick me up. Like you pick up a child and you know where—you pretend to be a plane. And so that's what I'll do. And he'll just run around the room with me in his arms with me just pretending to be a plane. And it's so small, but it really makes my day.

Christina Lightner: That sounds so much fun, Deshna. I'd love to see that.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: And so, this is also great that play is a part of creativity too. So, I am going to make you all my accountability-buddy for this. I have this perfect memory—when I was a kid—of flying a kite. And for the last few years, I have had this really intense urge to go fly a kite. And I even got one on Buy Nothing on Facebook. Somebody was getting rid of a kite, and I said, oh, I'll take it. And I've had it in my garage and I really want to go out and fly this kite. And the other thing I want to do, I don't know if I'm going to make this one happen just because I'm older now and my bones and joints don't move the same way. But do you ever—when you were little—roll down a hill?

Deshna Nagar: Yeah.

Christina Lightner: Yeah.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I really want to roll down a hill again. I'm a little scared of that one but I might try it.

Deshna Nagar: You could also try putting a cardboard box or something underneath and just sitting on it. That's how I do it.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Oh, that's a good idea. Yeah, I could try that one. I also wanted to say we were talking about pottery for sure can get expensive. So, I do want to acknowledge that you don't have to formally go to a place. There are—again, you can find things at community centers. A lot of libraries I know will do crafting classes or activities, you can find really cheap—I think even dollar stores, you can find clay or things like that. I think even Play-Doh can be really soothing. That can be a fun night with friends. You know, what do adults tend to do? It's like, oh, we'll go grab a drink or something after work for a lot of us. And so maybe that could be a way to integrate some creativity into your life. As instead of going to grab a drink, we're going to go do an art class together or a pottery class or whatever it may be. Or we're going to go roll down a hill together, could be that too.

Christina Lightner: Love it. We also did Play-Doh in a meeting, so as a team building, and it was so much fun. There was so much laughter and there was a prize for who had the best Play-Doh. There were some rules around it. It had to be nursing related and things like that but definitely be adapted to any setting. But that was a fun work thing that we did.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Another no-cost creative activity that you can do pretty much anywhere, anytime is intentionally engaging in pareidolia. This is what it's called when we perceive a specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern. So, in other words, we're seeing something that's really not there. So, this could be things like seeing two eyes and a mouth when you look at an electrical outlet, or if you've ever seen shapes in clouds. One great example of this is the man on the moon. And studies have found that creative people are more apt to see pareidolias in the world around them. And so, challenging yourself to look for more pareidolia can be a really great way to begin developing your creativity muscles.

Deshna Nagar: That sounds super fun. That's something I do when I'm taking a bath. I look for random pictures on the bathroom tiles.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: What pictures have you found on your bathroom tiles?

Deshna Nagar: So, there's this really creepy man that I found. That's the one that stands out to me.

Christina Lightner: I'm not sure that this is something that I've engaged in, so it's definitely something I'm going to have to add into my wellness journey. The only thing I can think of is growing up, I was always afraid of the shadow that was cast on the wall from the nightlight in my room. It looked like a marshmallow man. And that's literally the only thing that's coming to my mind.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I'm just going to be real. I feel like a marshmallow man would be an awesome thing to see.

Christina Lightner: I don't know why I was so afraid of him.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I'm not trying to—I should validate your childhood fears. I just thought marshmallows and I'm like, ooh, that sounds fun. Another wellness practice I wanted to mention for creative wellness. And actually, this plays into emotional wellness too, is singing. Activities like singing or humming can improve vagal nerve tone. So, the vagus nerve is the 10th cranial nerve, and it's the longest cranial nerve in the body. It connects the brain and the gut and lungs and heart. And whenever you stimulate it, you send signals to your body to relax and de-stress. And so, singing causes our vocal cords to vibrate. And it activates muscles in our throat and larynx and diaphragm, which are all connected to the vagus nerve. And because singing often involves deep breathing, this can also further stimulate the vagus nerve. So, I guess next time you're in the shower, let it rip.

Deshna Nagar: This is something I also do when I'm overthinking. So, for our listeners out there, I would encourage you to just hum for a minute right now and see if you have any thoughts. Because when you're humming, it's really difficult to have or form any thoughts. And so, it can be a good way to stop overthinking.

Christina Lightner: I love the idea of humming, and I love to sing. It's not something that I'm good at, so I don't typically do it in front of other people but definitely love to sing. I love to sing in the car. And I will sing in front of my daughter because she knows that it's just fun. So, we like to put on our favorite songs and sing to them while we're driving around.

I also like to sing while I'm cooking. I feel like it puts love into the food. So yeah, I encourage you to hum your favorite song. It helps us to self-soothe during stressful moments, like Lindsey was saying about the vagal nerve. So, it does help us with our parasympathetic nervous system activation. So, it's very helpful.

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Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I never counted this as singing, but I sing to my dog pretty much all day long. I make up stupid, silly songs to sing to her.

Christina Lightner: I do the exact same thing, Lindsey. I do it with our cats and I do with my daughter. I've made up all these songs for all of her little baby stuffed animals. She had one, that was Leo, and I had this whole song about Leo the Lion. I'm not going to sing it to you because, like I said, I'm not good at singing.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I'm not either, let's be clear. One of the themes of this is that you don't have to be good at something for it to be fun, enjoyable, and good for your wellness.

Christina Lightner: Exactly. And for those that do feel comfortable singing in front of people, you could have a karaoke night. That would be fun.

Deshna Nagar: Yeah, that sounds exciting.

Christina Lightner: We had something like that. My stepdad has a karaoke speaker. And at Christmas time, we were passing the microphone around and singing Christmas songs. And it's just so funny hearing yourself sing back on the speaker. And I'm just like, oh, thank God this is my family, and they love me.

Deshna Nagar: That's why I need to be a little bit drunk to do karaoke.

Christina Lightner: I think the great thing about singing is that it's no cost. There's no cost to sing. Another thing that is low or no cost is borrowing craft supplies from the library. My daughter and I have gotten little packages from the library and it's a lot of fun and it's free. All you have to do is return the items when you're finished.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I didn't know you could borrow art supplies from the library. That's pretty cool.

Christina Lightner: Yeah.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton, I love libraries.

Christina Lightner: I love libraries too. And seeing what your local library has is definitely beneficial. Oh, another fun thing is using household items for creative projects like upcycling jars. My daughter's always asking me, keep that jar, I want to make a pencil holder or different things. So, recycling or upcycling things that we might throw away is also a no-cost item that we can do.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I like that. I know we've been talking about things like drawing and painting and singing and pottery. But before we move on to talking about community-level strategies, I want to go back to something we said in the beginning and just reiterate it, is that creativity is not synonymous with the arts. So, there are many examples of creativity that fall well outside that realm. And this could be anything from designing a new system or process, things like coming up with a new recipe, or planning an event. It could also be things like just picking out your outfit each morning, that can be a creative exercise, or the way we choose to decorate our home. I also do think it's funny that many people think of the sciences as the antithesis of creativity, where it's like you often see science pitted against art. And I can think of few things more creative than engineering, for example.

Christina Lightner: Yeah.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I think now maybe we can shift to looking at community strategies. What's coming up for either of you when you think about nurturing creative wellness at the community level?

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Deshna Nagar: I think a great way to exercise your creative muscle is improv and drama. And the best thing is that it can be done anywhere. One of the golden rules of improv is yes, and. Instead of shutting down ideas, we build on them. I was walking through the neighborhood yesterday when I see Christina. And she's surrounded by frogs. Not just one or two, but a whole army.

And she's whispering to them, she's their leader. I swear, one of them even nodded. So obviously, I had to stop and ask, Christina, what's happening here?

Christina Lightner: I'm just here with all of my frogs, and I'm their frog leader. Oh, my gosh, Christina.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Are we improving or did this really happen?

Christina Lightner: She's improving.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Ok! I can't—

Deshna Nagar: I was just being playful.

Christina Lightner: I was like, how?

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I can actually totally—I did not have any trouble imagining that happening. Because you have the tree frog, so I could totally see you just—I thought this happened on campus.

Christina Lightner: Oh, yeah. That was my frog council meeting. Oh, that's why you needed all those tiny crowns. I thought you were just starting a—oh my gosh, I'm so bad.

Deshna Nagar: It can be awkward at first and a little daunting. But over time, it can be really funny and hilarious.

Christina Lightner: Yeah, I'm laughing so definitely, it's fun.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: And see, we are the perfect example of being bad at something and still having fun with it.

Deshna Nagar: Yeah.

Christina Lightner: Well, that was fun, Deshna.

Deshna Nagar: Oh, God. I've also done this with my parents before, but I did something called emotion swap, which is also a different form of improv. And it was all chaos at first to just what happened right now, which made it even funnier.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: What's emotion swap?

Deshna Nagar: Oh. Emotion swap is—so imagine a room divided into four quadrants and each represents a different emotion. So, let's say, fear, anger, joy, and jealousy. So, each person stands in one quadrant fully embodying that emotion. And then one person starts the scene reacting to a situation based on the emotion of their quadrant. And then at random intervals, someone calls out, switch, and everyone needs to move to a new quadrant and instantly adopt the emotion of the quadrant therein.

Christina Lightner: Oh, that's fun. So, there's an acting component to it?

Deshna Nagar: Yeah.

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Christina Lightner: That sounds like a lot of fun.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Yeah. I like the example of improv because it can be so spontaneous and easy to execute. I think the one that had come to mind for me is a little bit more organized, but community mural projects, I think are super cool. They often reflect some theme that's important to the community. And I think there's different ways of conducting them. But my understanding is typically an artist will take charge, work with the community to come up with a design. And then they sketch and map everything out and then people can come volunteer and shifts to actually paint and fill in the artwork. And I've seen similar takes on this where it may not be a wall mural, but it might be themed statues that get painted. Like for example, in Center County in Pennsylvania, there are these book benches around the area that people have decorated. Or in my hometown of Buffalo, New York, there are statues of buffaloes that people have painted. So different towns will have different themes based on what's unique to their area?

Christina Lightner: And my daughter, we were at—the mural brought up a time that we were at an arts festival, and just anybody walking by could color in on the poster. And my daughter sat there for probably 45 minutes to an hour coloring. And then when we came back around at the end of the art festival, she wanted to see. Like, where's mine? And did anybody add to it? So, she was very engaged in that art mural.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Your daughter sounds so cool, Christina.

Christina Lightner: She is. And she's so creative. Creative wellness is right up her alley. We have a nurses' rock mural that our student affairs out of the College of Nursing takes to the different events that have students. And it's the same idea, Lindsey, where they leave the artwork the way it was from the time before, and then it just gets added to until it's all complete. And then another thing I just wanted to mention real quick was our mental health bulletin board that I talked about previously in the emotional episode is now our coloring poster board. So, we have a color poster board up, and it's nursing themed because we're nursing. But then we have pencils and markers there for the community to interact. And it can be students, but it's also faculty and staff. And it's so much fun when you come by the board and people are actually engaging. And so, we get groups of people coloring. And then we have parents and family weekend where people came in and the families of the students were coloring on the board, so it was lots of fun.

Deshna Nagar: That makes me think of, we have a huge chess board on our wall, in our lounge, in the Mental Health Department. And so, each time a person comes in, they'll move a piece.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton:

Christina Lightner: Oh, my gosh. There's a community chess then?

Deshna Nagar: Yeah.

Christina Lightner: Oh, I love that.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: That's fun. I'm even thinking of low key, silly, creative, fun things. I remember when one of my coworkers got a new car, he put a contest up on the whiteboard to name his new car, and everybody wrote suggestions. And then you could vote for which suggestion you wanted. So, there's all kinds of ways to have both that play and that creative piece. I'm also thinking about just lower key things people could do within a community, like community chalk content—like sidewalk contests or thinking around the winter holidays. I know some neighborhoods will do light display contests or things like that or different holidays throughout the year, do decoration contests. So, there's really so many things you can do in this realm.

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Deshna Nagar: I love all of these ideas. But often it can be difficult to set aside time to do things like these. But if you set up a weekly ritual, then there's something that you look forward to and you also have that time that you know you've committed to your creative wellness.

Christina Lightner: That's so awesome that you just brought up rituals. Because on the way here, I was listening to a podcast. And they were talking about how small routines or rituals turn into habits. And then those habits turn into change. And so, it is working towards change.

Deshna Nagar: Yeah. Christina, do you have any rituals for being creative?

Christina Lightner: So, one of the things that I like to do during meetings is I doodle on my paper. So, I have a—I take notes on my computer, and I have a notebook that I take. And I'll draw little flowers or butterflies that are my two go to. So, it's just a way of being present in the meeting, but then also having that outlet.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I just saw a study that doodling is really good for retention and learning new information, and that it can actually help you process and encode information better than if you just listen to something.

Christina Lightner: Yeah. And it really does help me personally, obviously find what works well for you, but it does—it helps my tentativeness.

Deshna Nagar: That makes sense because there's also research out there that says doodling can reduce anxiety. So that makes sense.

Christina Lightner: Yeah.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: So, as we wrap this one up, just rounding out our community section, I just want to go back again to the idea that creativity is not just about the arts. And this also applies at the community level. So, murals and things like that are great. But planning an event like kickball or a cornhole tournament or a neighborhood barbecue also counts as creativity too. Or it could be coming up with a creative solution to a challenge that your community is facing. In our physical wellness episode, we talked about this firewood distribution program that was created to help folks be able to stay warm in the winter. So, I think that's a great example of creative thinking and problem solving. And also, things like community gardens, or I've seen some neat sustainability projects, those are all great examples of community creativity.

Christina Lightner: Yeah. I love that you brought up the barbecue. We had a chili cook off at the College of Nursing that was a lot of fun. And so, we had a room that we reserved, and everybody made their chili recipe. And then you weren't allowed to say which one was yours. And everybody voted blindly on which chili they thought was best. And the winner got their recipe published to everybody else. So, their recipe got sent out. So, it was a lot of fun. And the winning chili was actually plant based.

Deshna Nagar: You need to send me that recipe, Christina.

Christina Lightner: OK, I'll do that.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: I'm going to take y'all's word about creativity and cooking because as we've established, that's not a realm of creativity I currently engage in. But I can see how it could be fun, I guess.

Christina Lightner: Yes. Find what works for you.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: That's it for this episode of *12 Degrees*. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast so you don't miss any of the upcoming discussions that will help you promote habits that can enhance longevity and quality of life. I'm Lindsey Whissel Fenton.

Christina Lightner: I'm Christina Lightner.

Deshna Nagar: And I'm Deshna Nagar.

Lindsey Whissel Fenton: Until next time, we wish you good progress in your wellness journey. *12 Degrees* is produced by WPSU in collaboration with the Penn State Ross 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 healthcare provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or mental health condition. Please consult your physician or other qualified healthcare provider immediately if you are experiencing any suicidal thoughts. If you're in crisis, help is available for free 24/7 in the US by calling or texting the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. More information is available at [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org).

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