

115: The Environmental Degree

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Welcome to *12 Degrees*, the podcast that offers real-life strategies for nurturing full-spectrum wellness. I'm Lindsey Whissel Fenton.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: I'm Christina Lightner.

DESHNA NAGAR: And I'm Deshna Nagar.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Together, we explore 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: We want to empower you to make informed choices across the full spectrum of wellness. In this episode, we're going to be looking at the environmental degree of wellness and what we can do both at the individual level and the community level to support it. Christina, kick things off. What is environmental wellness?

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: So environmental wellness highlights how our surroundings influence our overall well-being. So, this involves creating safe, clean, and sustainable spaces. And this is at home, in the workplace, and within our communities. So, this degree operates on both a micro, like our personal environment, and a macro level, including our connection to nature, our community and the health of the planet. Small actions in our immediate surroundings can contribute to broader long-term environmental impact.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Yeah, you mentioned the micro and the macro. And I think in this discussion, it might be helpful to touch on both.

DESHNA NAGAR: Yeah. The term environment can be so broad because it encompasses all of the different sensory inputs, like noise, light and visual stimuli, temperature, texture, smells, even something like the taste of air.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Definitely. So maybe we can start with talking about built spaces or indoor spaces, and then we can move on from there.

DESHNA NAGAR: I think it might be helpful to start by talking about the benefits of environmental wellness to help people understand why this matters.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Great idea, Deshna.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Oh, yeah, good thinking.

DESHNA NAGAR: When it comes to our indoor spaces, tending to our environmental wellness can have benefits like healthy lungs from cleaner air, improved focus and productivity, stress reduction, and enhanced mood. It can also improve our sleep.

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CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Yeah, that's right. And when we think about outdoor spaces and environmental wellness, we see things like boosted immune function, increased energy, physical activity, better social connections, and even a connection to our sense of purpose, so all good things. And just to mention, it is a struggle for me to get outdoors during the winter and cold months. I don't like being cold, so this is a challenge for myself to get warmer attire. So, one of my thrifting goals for this summer is to try to find warm weather clothing for this winter.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I will come with you. I'm volunteering to come with you on your thrifting trip because I love warm clothes. I love being cozy and big, bulky turtlenecks and cardigans. And I'm actually the opposite where I hate being hot, and I'm probably the only weirdo who doesn't actually like summer that much.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Oh.

DESHNA NAGAR: Damn.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: This is exciting. Yay. Do you want to come along too, Deshna?

DESHNA NAGAR: Yes. And we can think more about temperature as we consider indoor spaces as well.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Absolutely. So, thinking about our indoor environment, there are so many simple things we can do to enhance wellness. And we'll talk about temperature, but a lot of these things are things we might already be doing without really thinking too much about the ways they benefit us. These can be things like being intentional with how you decorate your space in terms of what colors you choose and the lighting you use. It can also be things like adding live plants, which not only look nice but can help improve air quality. And I feel guilty even talking about plants because anyone who knows me will be thinking of the long week of plant corpses behind me.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: I know we've talked about this before. Like all things wellness, the key is finding what works well for you, and maybe plants just aren't your thing.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Yeah. I want them to be, but you might be right.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: So, the key is finding what works for you in terms of your ideal decor. So, I like my space to have balance, so I'm not a minimalist or a maximalist. One thing I love to do is to decorate with my daughter's artwork and mine at times. Sometimes we'll do those co-painting. She'll paint, and I'll paint, and then we'll share them at the end. And so sometimes they'll be on the wall next to each other. So that's a lot of fun.

And, Lindsey, when we were talking about this before the recording, you said you're a maximalist.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Most definitely. I finally had to accept that about myself after years of trying to force minimalism. I would go through phases where I would get rid of all my stuff, and then I would slowly re-accumulate, but I do have a level I reach where it feels comfortable. I really like my space to feel super cozy, which, for me, means pictures all over the walls and antique rugs and lots of throw pillows and blankets and also mementos around me and very personal artwork, just things that help me really feel rooted and connected in the space and to memories and good times.

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Deshna, what about you? What decor nurtures your environmental wellness?

DESHNA NAGAR: I'm with you both. My style is organized chaos. I have a lot of things, but I try to keep them as organized as I can. I also have a whole lot of candles in my room.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Oh. We're going to talk more about that in a minute, Deshna, so hold that thought and brace yourself.

DESHNA NAGAR: Ooh. I'm officially scared.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Before we go there, I do have to share an area that's been a struggle for me for my environmental wellness is stuff just having clutter different places and never seeming to be able to clear it out. So currently, our office building is being renovated. So, when we have our building finished, I'll finally have somewhere to put all of the things that belong in my work office in my work office and take them out of my home office, which will be very helpful. My home office is small, and it's a shared space. And so, it's a very welcomed event for the office to open back up.

DESHNA NAGAR: That was a huge struggle for me too. At the start of the semester, my room looked like a tornado hit it, but there was one thing that really helped me that I came across in a TikTok video. And the phrase goes, don't put it down, put it away. And so, whenever I enter my house and I just fling my keys on the table, I remind myself, Deshna, don't put it down, put it away. And just practicing that repeatedly has been really helpful for me.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: That's a very good tip. And if I don't put my keys where they go, I will never leave the house again in my vehicle because they will be lost. So very good tip. I love that.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I might have to try to embrace that, but I'm going to be real. I'm going to blame my ADHD on that one. I'm a very "out of sight, out of mind" person where if I don't see it, it doesn't exist, which means I have to leave things out as a reminder to myself. And that could be anything from vitamins and supplements on my countertops to paperwork that I need to deal with. And I do agree, those unsightly piles can be stressful but so can forgetting to take care of those things. So, I don't know what the balance is here. I know for me, a big game changer was having that ability to have a separate room for my home office, which I know isn't available to everyone, but it sounds like you're going to be getting that in the near future, Christina. I would say, though, even if you don't have a separate office space, even dedicating one section of your space for tasks and confining things to there might be helpful.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Yeah. And finding what works well for you, something we've been echoing throughout the podcast.

DESHNA NAGAR: I also want to go back to what Christina shared about her struggle with keeping her workspace organized. I read a tip from Dana K. White, the creator of the no-mess decluttering method, to be aware that organizing and decluttering are actually two different things. People tend to lump them together, but they're actually different strategies. You can organize clutter all you want. But if it's still too much, it will still stay overwhelming. It will just be prettier.

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CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Yeah, so very true. And I've been trying different techniques to declutter and organizing. There is the 12-12-12 technique. And I just recently came across this, and I tried to do this last night. And the tip is to find 12 things to donate so to help the declutter, also find 12 things to throw away, also helping to declutter, and then put away 12 things that organizing.

The tip is to start with one room or one area. But I found it difficult and overwhelming to start with 12-12-12, so my tip is to start smaller than 12-12-12. So, I did 3-3-3, and I felt that was much more manageable than doing 12 of each. And another tip is to take before and after pictures. This can be a fun way to celebrate our successes. And then also, find in your community those bulk trash pickup days—so when you can put out extra garbage, if they're taking electronics, or sometimes they'll even take old appliances—and then trash to treasure—so one person's trash is somebody else's treasure. And like I mentioned earlier, I love to thrift. That's one of the things that—on a rainy day, I'll ask my daughter what she wants to do. And she'll say, let's go thrifting. And I'm just like...she's right there with me. We both love that thrifting experience.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Yeah. I think a lot of communities now do those bulk trash pickup days. And I know when I lived in Bellefonte, that was practically a holiday. It was like, you could just camp out on your porch and watch people and see what treasures people found. I know I found some great things that way. And I want to go back to you said celebrating your wins, which was something we talked about in a previous episode. And I applaud you for adapting. 12-12-12 too, something that was workable for you. I also believe too it's helpful to focus on one thing at a time, so you don't get overwhelmed. And I know something I've recently begun to pay a little bit more attention to and is something that's really easy to be overlooked but that can have a big impact on our wellness, and that's air quality and looking for ways to reduce toxins. So, this can involve things like using nontoxic cleaning products, really paying attention to the chemicals that you're bringing into your home, and even simple things like just regularly dusting and vacuuming. And if you're able—it might not be available to everyone but potentially thinking about getting an air filter.

DESHNA NAGAR: One thing I love that's free and effective is just opening your windows. According to the EPA, indoor air quality can be up to a hundred times worse than outdoor air quality, which is wild. So even a few minutes of fresh air can do wonders.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Yeah, and we often associate open windows with warmer months, but it's just as important to get fresh air in the winter. And it doesn't even have to be a long time. Just five minutes a day can significantly enhance indoor air quality by getting rid of that stale air and also reducing indoor pollutants.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Yeah, and as a bonus, cooler air also has a soothing effect on our nasal lining. And I just wanted to touch on something that Lindsey had said about filters. I just had somebody come and inspect our heating and air conditioning. And they actually said that you're supposed to change the filter monthly, and I did not know that. And so that's another tip, is to change the filters in your heating system monthly.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Not just heating too if you use window air conditioning units. I recently bought a house, and they left the window air conditioners behind. And went to clean them, and they were just full of mold. And so those things, again, can be easy to overlook but can make a big difference when you do that maintenance.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Yes. Very good point, Lindsey.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: And one other thing while we're talking about toxins and air quality and pollutants. And this one breaks my heart a little bit, but one way to improve air quality is by reducing the use of candles or incense. That's because most conventional candles are made from paraffin wax, which is a petroleum byproduct. When burned, paraffin wax can release VOCs, volatile organic compounds, like benzene and formaldehyde, which are linked to cancer. And that cozy glow, the thing that I love the most, it comes with soot, a fine particle that can irritate your lungs, especially if you have asthma or other respiratory conditions. And the bad news just keeps coming. If your candle is scented, it might also contain fragrance chemicals, some of which include phthalates, which are known to mess with hormones. And we can't forget the wick. Cheaper candles may use wicks containing lead or heavy metals, which release harmful particles as they burn. I'm a big candle lover, so I will admit that I struggle with this one.

DESHNA NAGAR: That sound you just heard is my heart breaking.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I know. The pain is very real, Deshna, but there is some good news. There are safer ways to enjoy that candlelit vibe. Candles made of beeswax, soy, or coconut wax produce fewer pollutants and less soot. And we can also protect our air by keeping the space well ventilated, trimming the wick, and not burning the candle for too long.

DESHNA NAGAR: OK, that is good news. You really had me worried there for a second, Lindsey. I can do beeswax, soy, and coconut. I'm probably going to have to do a memorial service for the rest of my candles—and for your plants, Lindsey.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: The struggle is real. Mm-hmm.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: And when you were talking there, it reminded me about the option of the little battery-powered tealight candles as well. So, if you still want that warm, cozy glow but don't want to have to burn the candle because of all of the effects, you could try that.

So, I know I was heartbroken too when I learned about the effects of candles and incense. And another way we can enjoy scents is with essential oils. One of my favorites is lavender. It has that calming effect. But if you're looking for uplifting, citrus is a good one for that but find what works well for you.

DESHNA NAGAR: And improving air quality is not just about the things we cut out, like burning candles. RIP. It's also about what we add in, like using proper ventilation when we cook, so things like using fans or opening windows and doors. There are even some tiny hacks that can really make a difference, like cooking on the back burners of your stove because they're usually closer to the range hood and capture more fumes and pollutants. You could also try using lower heat settings when cooking to reduce the amount of smoke and fumes produced.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Or you could just not cook at all, like I do.

[LAUGHTER]

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CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: So, we've been talking about air quality. Now let's talk about air temperature and how it relates to environmental wellness. So going back to high school science class, the mitochondria are the powerhouse of our cells, so basically our body's energy factories. And research shows that temperature can impact these little guys. So, for example, mild cold exposure can actually stimulate the production of new mitochondria and improve the efficiency of the ones we already have. This could mean more energy, better metabolism, and greater resilience to stress. Similarly, heat exposure, like a sauna or warm climate, can improve mitochondrial respiratory function, so supporting everything from circulation to cognitive performance. So next time you step outside into the cold or soak in the warmth, remember, your mitochondria might just thank you. In the context of environmental wellness, this does support the idea that brief, controlled exposure to varied temperatures, like opening a window for fresh air in the winter, like Deshna had mentioned, or taking a hot bath can do more than just refresh our minds. It can be boosting our body at that cellular level. But extremes in either direction can be damaging. So as with most things' wellness, it's about balance.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I'm glad you brought that up, Christina. Temperature's effect on mitochondrial function is something I read about last year. And I tried to challenge myself, as much as I hate the heat, to not crank my air conditioning as soon as it gets hot out. And I'm not sure how well it worked for my mitochondria, but it definitely had a positive effect on my electric bill. And we'll be talking about financial wellness later this season.

DESHNA NAGAR: So, we've been talking about temperature-controlled spaces, in other words, indoor spaces. What about outdoor spaces? Spending time in nature can elevate mood and provide a sense of relaxation and do a whole lot of other good things for our brains and bodies.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Yeah. We hear, get outdoors, and it can be easy to default to thinking that this means we have to go camping or hiking, but any time in fresh air counts. So, nurturing this degree can be as simple as eating outside, whether that's a bench outside your office or opting for the outdoor dining section at a restaurant.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: And honestly, even just looking at the outdoors can have health benefits. So, a landmark study done in 1984 by Roger Ulrich discovered that surgical patients recover more quickly and need less pain medication if their hospital window overlooked trees instead of a brick wall. So, the study found that even that passive exposure to natural scenes can reduce stress and support recovery. And these patients also reported fewer complications, shorter hospital stays when they had that view of greenery. So, it's a good reminder that design and environment really do matter, especially in places meant for healing. So, one of the things that I do is when I wake up, I open up all the curtains in the house.

DESHNA NAGAR: Yeah. And while windows can be great, there's research that says that even images of nature can have a positive effect on wellness. So, I intern as a counselor at the Centre County Correctional Facility. And I noticed that in the prison, they have natural murals painted on the walls. And I got really curious about why. I found that research supports the idea that art with landscapes of nature can have a really positive effect on stress and mood. So even if you're in a space without windows or without a great view, research supports the idea that displaying photos or art with images of nature can really support your wellness.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Yeah. And this applies to other sensory experiences too. For example, the sound of water has been linked to a number of positive health effects, including reduced stress, lower

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blood pressure, and improved mood. So, we're seeing some themes here. And even if it's a recording, that sound of water can promote relaxation and a sense of well-being. And if you can actually get near water, that can boost your wellness too. Studies show that water, especially moving water like oceans, waterfalls, or rivers, can have a positive impact on both mental and physical health due to the release of negative ions.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: That makes so much sense. I always feel so much better after either sitting at the beach or sitting along the river. And it's not just water. There are so many aspects of nature that can nurture our well-being. There's a practice in Japanese called Shinrin-yoku, or forest bathing, that's all about slowing down, engaging our senses, and feeling present in nature. It's basically a way to combine the Mindful awareness with outdoors. So just find an outdoor space, leave your phone and other distractions behind, and engage your senses by paying attention to the sounds, smells, colors, and textures around you. Take some deep breaths and allow yourself to relax. Research does suggest that this mindful connection with nature helps us to reduce stress, lowers our blood pressure, improves sleep, and can even boost our immune system.

DESHNA NAGAR: Penn State actually does weekly forest bathing sessions for students, and I unfortunately haven't been able to attend because it clashes with one of my classes. But I also just want to point out that while this can be done in an actual forest, you can also practice it in a park or just a quiet green space. So even if you're in an urban setting, you can still go forest bathing. Look for parks, gardens, or even individual trees on sidewalks or in yards. And if you really want to maximize the experience, try visiting these green spaces in the early morning when it's less crowded.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Those are all great suggestions. One other sort of related one is the practice of grounding, also known as earthing. And this involves making direct contact with the earth's surface by walking barefoot on a natural surface, like grass, sand, or dirt. It's rooted—no pun intended—in the idea that this contact helps the body to maintain an optimal electrical balance, which can reduce inflammation and stress. And I do think the science may still be out on the evidence for this practice, but at least anecdotally, a lot of people do report finding it helpful and that it doesn't have to just be walking barefoot. You can also lie on the ground, or they make something called a grounding mat. So, like Deshna mentioned, if you live in an environment where walking around barefoot isn't feasible or advisable, this is a tool, these grounding mats, that simulate walking barefoot by, I guess, creating an electrical connection between the body and the earth.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: So very interesting. And I'm glad you brought this up, Lindsey. This is a great, easy-to-use wellness tool that can have a lot of potential benefits. As you mentioned, more research is needed, but some research does suggest that grounding can improve our sleep, reduce muscle tension, improve our blood flow, and accelerate wound healing. It can also have mental health benefits, like reducing stress and boosting our mood. So, I often practice this while walking with my cats. And leaving the phone behind is a key portion to this. We'll talk about digital wellness in a later episode but also getting in the other senses as well. So, I combine this with the forest bathing.

DESHNA NAGAR: And even if research doesn't fully support the benefits of earthing, what we do know is that there's a growing body of evidence suggesting that being outside, with or without touching the earth, benefits our physical and mental health.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Yes, most definitely.

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LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Yeah. And I remember I had taken a mindfulness class once, and we did walking meditation where it was basically what they're describing in earthing, and we walked barefoot on the grass as a mindfulness practice. So, I'm not sure where we stand with the science on the electrical charges, but I think definitely anytime you can connect your senses to nature can be good for you.

DESHNA NAGAR: I actually used to do that a lot until I saw my neighbor's dog taking a poop in my backyard. And I was like, OK, we're not doing that anymore. But another safer environmental wellness practice that's pretty easy to get into is nature journaling. It's basically just using words or pictures to reflect on what you notice when you're outside.

So, this could be like if you see an owl, you describe what it looks like or simply sketching out the owl. And this really picked up steam during the pandemic. And fun fact, a research team at Penn State actually studied it.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Oh, my goodness, I'm so interested. What did they find?

DESHNA NAGAR: They looked at different age groups and found that adults really appreciated the community building aspects, like bonding over a shared activity, while younger folks were more into spotting wildlife and being in the moment. So, you know, something for everyone.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Interesting.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: And one more tip related to wildlife—well, sort of, to animals anyway. And I want to say this isn't feasible for everyone, but welcoming a pet into your home can be a great way to increase time spent outside. Research has shown that compared with non-dog owners, dog owners walked more and spent more time in natural outdoor environments. Other research has found that in addition to spending more time outside, people with furry friends tend to exercise more often, feel more loved, and just generally feel happier than those without a furry friend, often by significant margins. And again, I know that having a pet isn't of interest or isn't available to everyone, so I'm thinking of ways you could enjoy the benefits of this might be by spending time with a friend and their pet, or through volunteering, or even just pet sitting. I'm obviously biased. I'm a dog mom, so I love this one. But I will say too, as a dog mom, sometimes you need to do stuff, and you need someone to watch your fur baby. So, helping out a friend could be a good way to get those benefits without having to make the commitment of owning a pet yourself.

DESHNA NAGAR: I like that. I'm going to take these stats to my roommates and get them to co-parent a dog with me. It's for a wellness.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Totally for your wellness.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: I love that you brought this up, Lindsey. We're proud parents of two rescue cats, the mom and the daughter, and so thankful and grateful that they chose us. It has been so rewarding. And I've always been a dog person, and now I'm a cat person too. And the purring and the biscuit baking is amazing. And I love pet sitting as well. And this is a great way to help out your neighbors. And we always have people that come and take care of our cats when we go out of town. And so, it's very nice for people to do that for us, so I agree, Lindsey.

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DESHNA NAGAR: Maybe this is a good time to move into environmental wellness practices at the community level.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Yeah. There are so many ways to engage in practices at the community level that support this degree of wellness, and it doesn't have to be a big formal thing. One of the things that we do as a family is pick up litter, and this is something that I've been doing since a kid. And this practice is both rewarding personally and for the nature, so for our planet, our water, and our animals. We like to make a game out of it. So, who can fill up their bag with the most litter? And this helps bring in those other degrees of wellness like physical, social, and creative. And so, another spin on this, if you want to make a bigger impact and to be more social, is to volunteer with a group or a local organization on cleanup efforts. So, for example, I participated in a river cleanup, which was very rewarding.

DESHNA NAGAR: Christina, I thought of you and the cool things you do with your daughter when I read about this. There's something called the Great Backyard Bird Count. Have you heard of this?

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: No, but I'm extremely excited to learn more about this because I love birds, I have a backyard, and we have lots of birds in our yard. So super excited to hear about it.

DESHNA NAGAR: OK. The National Audubon Society organizes this event every year. It's a free citizen science project where participants count and report birds they observe during the four-day period in February. Participants are asked to count birds for as little as 15 minutes or as long as they wish on one or more days of the event and report their sightings online at birdcount.org. The data people collect helps scientists monitor and protect bird populations. And anyone can participate anywhere in the world.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Well, that's so exciting. So, helping with research along the way.

DESHNA NAGAR: Yeah.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I can already see that you're going to become a bird counter, Christina.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: I know. I'm ready to go home and count birds.

[LAUGHTER]

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: That just makes me think of another way to enjoy environmental wellness. So, my dad and I will take my dog for a walk. And there's an app—I think it's a free app, and I want to say it's called Merlin. They probably have other ones, but I believe this is run by Cornell. And if you hit Play on it, it will actually record live and find your area, and it will identify the bird calls that you're hearing. So that can be fun too.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Oh, that sounds like a lot of fun. I only know cardinal and some owls so far—and the blue jay.

DESHNA NAGAR: I cannot relate to your excitement, Christina, but I fully support it.

[LAUGHTER]

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LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I think it's like one of those weird things that just sort of happens. I don't know. Because I think of there are ways—this goes back to our creativity and play episode. There are ways to engage with your environmental wellness that can be done just by embracing your childlike sense of wonder. So, at my old house, there was a robin who, two years in a row, nested on the porch. And it was such a perfect view. You could watch it from the living room window without disturbing her. And I named her Winnie. And Winnie would lay her babies. And I just remember watching these baby birds and her nurse the nest and feeling like a little kid the day they hatched. And then something really cool happened. After I moved to Connecticut, I came out the one morning. And I had my condo at the time. And I looked out, and there was all these twigs and stuff all over my porch. And I was like, oh, what caused that mess? And I looked up, and there was a robin's nest on the outdoor light of my porch. And so, I think Winnie followed me all the way to Connecticut, and I got to watch her babies again, and it was really cool.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Aw, that's so rewarding.

DESHNA NAGAR: Aw.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: And they were a very progressive family because her partner bird was there, and he took her name. His name was Mr. Winnie.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: I love that.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Props to them. Another thing that's coming up for me—I was actually going to bring this up in our social wellness degree, but it could also apply here. And that's the importance of third spaces. This is a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, and it refers to social locations that exist outside of home, being our first place, or work, being our second place. And there are spaces that tend to foster community, more casual social interactions and connection. So traditionally, it was things like coffee shops, parks, gyms, or even stoops on porches. And unfortunately, these spaces have been disappearing, and researchers are starting to investigate the consequences that losing these kind of spaces can have for public health. So as an environmental wellness strategy, communities can think about how to create or nurture these spaces. And this could be things like investing in local spaces like parks, libraries, and community centers, supporting local businesses like cafes and bookstores, and offering community programming and events and workshops and even neighborhood activities. Those can all activate these third spaces or third environments. And finally, also advocating for policies that protect and fund public spaces.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: This is so true, Lindsey, and something I often think about, especially on nice days when there aren't any or many people outside. Growing up, we were always outside when it was nice out, and I loved our back porch as one of our many third spaces. I'm going to work on that where I live now.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Yeah. And going back to our earlier discussion of decorating our indoor spaces in ways that feel calming and inviting, you could do that for your porch too.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Yeah, I will do that.

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DESHNA NAGAR: There's one more piece of environmental wellness on the community level that I really think we should talk about. It's easy to focus on the physical stuff, like plants, furniture, or natural light, but our environment is also made up of the people around us. Feeling safe and at ease in a space isn't just about the cozy blankets or quiet corners. It's about feeling supported like you're in a place where you truly belong. The relationships we have at home, whether it's with your family, roommates, or a partner, can make such a big difference because even if everything looks perfect, it can still feel off if there's tension or stress in the air.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: That's such a good point, Deshna. So, as we think about improving our environment, we should also consider the physical and emotional elements and make sure we're creating space for open communication as well as checking in on how we're showing up for each other.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Well, I think that's a perfect note to end on.

CHRISTINA LIGHTNER: Yeah. I'm going to go home and count birds and decorate my back porch.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: That's it for this episode of *12 Degrees*. To learn more, you can visit wellness.psu.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. 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 on 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 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 the US by calling or texting the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. More information is available at 988lifeline.org.

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