

The LAUNCH Podcast – Meditation with Dr. Becky Acabchuk

[00:00:00] **Emma Bjorngard:** [00:00:00] Welcome to this episode of the UConn LAUNCH Podcast. I'm Emma Bjorngard-Basayne, Academic Advisor at the UConn Stamford campus.

[00:00:15] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:00:15] And I'm Kayla Hogrefe, Academic Advisor, Hartford campus.

[00:00:18] **Emma Bjorngard:** [00:00:18] Today we talk to Dr. Rebecca Acabchuk. She is a professor here at UConn and she teaches health psychology and she teaches yoga and meditation class here as well.

[00:00:31] A little bit of background about Rebecca. She graduated from Cornell University as an undergrad with a degree in psychology. and she had a concentration in statistics. She got her PhD from UConn in physiology and neurobiology. So Kayla and I have been talking about how in general, across the country, there is a trend of college students feeling more stress, experiencing anxiety at higher [00:01:00] levels than before. So we thought this would be an interesting conversation to have.

[00:01:05] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:01:05] And honestly, until maybe within the last year or so, when I would think of meditation, I would think of like a guy on a mountain top, like touching his forefinger to his thumb. Like a super spiritual kind of unattainable idea of meditation.

[00:01:21] And that is not what it is at all. And I realized that - Emma and I went to this conference on the UConn campus like several months ago, and Becky Acadbchuk led a small group in a meditation and you can just almost immediately feel the effects of just meditating one time and how it reduces your stress and anxiety levels.

[00:01:44] And so it really opened my eyes to what a powerful tool this is and how students can benefit from it so much.

[00:01:54] **Emma Bjorngard:** [00:01:54] Yeah. I think just going off of that point too, I thought that to meditate, you know, you had to spend like an hour a [00:02:00] day doing it, but I've learned that it's something that you can do, you know, for five to 10 minutes a day, and it's. It's pretty straight forward. Even as someone that commutes by train to the UConn Stamford campus from New Haven, I sometimes use time on the train to meditate, which has been very relaxing and energizing.

[00:02:20] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:02:20] So please enjoy listening to Becky as she explains what meditation is. The science behind it, how it can help you in your personal, professional and academic life.

[00:02:31] And she also provides some awesome tips for how to get started and where to go when you're looking for more resources.

[00:02:46] What is your name and position at UConn?

[00:02:50] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:02:50] Hi. Yeah, my name is Becky Acabchuk, and I've been at UConn for about eight years now. I got my PhD here in physiology and neurobiology department, [00:03:00] and I work now at the Institute for collaboration on health intervention in policy, also known as in ship and at in chip.

[00:03:09] I'm a postdoc. And I've also been teaching yoga and meditation for about 15 years now. and I actually teach a, uh, a meditation class here at Yukon, at a CMHS on Mondays. So if any of your students ever wanted to come, we have a class at, at noon every Monday, a meditation class. And I also teach yoga. To the faculty and staff here at Yukon, and I run workshops, uh, for different groups here on campus.

[00:03:37] I've done groups with different sports teams. I've done them with different faculty groups on campus. I'm not teaching any classes right now, but I have taught a health psychology. Here at Yukon, and I've taught the neuroscience of meditation at Connecticut College, but right now I'm just focusing on research and my research program is looking [00:04:00] at how mindfulness could help build resilience in mental wellbeing.

[00:04:04] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:04:04] That's so fascinating.

[00:04:05] Do you, do you find that a lot of students come to your meditation workshops at the counseling and mental health. Services?

[00:04:11] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:04:11] Yes. So that's just like a weekly class that I do. Yeah. So we get, it's really neat because it's a big mix of students that show up. Some students just come in and try it once.

[00:04:21] Some come every week, and then there's graduate students that come. There's professors that come yeah. What I really love is having everyone kind of sit in a circle with them. Professors, grad students, undergrads, staff, like the whole mix, just kind of all at the same level is really nice.

[00:04:42] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:04:42] That's awesome.

[00:04:43] And when you were teaching your, when you were teaching the undergrads, I know we've spoken before and you had mentioned that you incorporated mindfulness. Like made it a requirement of the curriculum of the class. Yes. And so did you get a lot of feedback from students about [00:05:00] that?

[00:05:00] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:05:00] Yeah, so, well, when I taught health psychology, I didn't make meditation required as a homework assignment.

[00:05:08] What I did is I had led guided meditations in class. That's what it was. And the students would tell me how much they would look forward to coming to class. Because they knew it would give them a little break, a little time to reset. So they really enjoy that. For homework assignment, I gave them an option to pick up a new healthy habit.

[00:05:27] So it could be, you know, some people wanted to go on a run, some people wanted to, you know, eat more vegetables. But a lot of people chose to start a meditation practice on their own.

[00:05:37] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:05:37] that's us. That's so cool. And I've jumped ahead in the questions. Okay. So let me backtrack. What do you see right now is the biggest sources of stressed anxiety for college students nowadays?

[00:05:47] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:05:47] A good question. So, yeah, I guess looking at that, I would think about, you know, the typical sources of stress that were around 20 years ago when I went to school. And those, [00:06:00] of course, are still present today. you know, adjusting to being away from home is a big source of stress for incoming freshman. the pressure to Excel, the pressure to, you know, get the grades, you know, when we put so much pressure on ourselves to do well.

[00:06:17] I think, so a lot of that pressure is kind of like that internal pressure. and, you know, balancing time, making new friends. So kind of the typical. Stresses. but I think we have some different things going on now too, with the rising cost of college. I'm seeing a lot about, you know, financial stress is really playing a bigger role on college campuses now, more than ever.

[00:06:40] In the sense that, you know, people are holding multiple jobs maybe to pay for college. Which makes, you know more stress because you have less time. And those, even students, if their parents are paying for it, they feel like an obligation almost to do well, even more so. So they're putting more pressure on [00:07:00] themselves because they know their parents are putting so much of their money into their college education.

[00:07:06] I definitely hear students talking about that. But I think, you know, besides those, that there's, there's even more things going on besides that, that we didn't have back. You know, when I went to school with cell phones and social media, that adds more stress to the typical college student's life too, with you know, the cell phone is a major distraction.

[00:07:31] So, you know. That makes sometimes focusing a little bit more difficult when you're getting constantly interrupted in texts and

[00:07:41] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:07:41] tweets and pings and your phone going off.

[00:07:43] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:07:43] Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. And just kind of learning you away from your studies. Just constant temptation. you know, in some cases it can always be considered an addiction, you know, for a lot of people.

[00:07:56] Right. so that, that could add. [00:08:00] And then of course we have the social media right. So we have all this social comparison that we're doing and the added stress of, you know, what does everybody else doing? And comparing myself to everybody else. It's just constantly like kind of in your face all the time.

[00:08:14] So, so that creates a lot of judgment and a lot of self-judgment in which is, uh, you know, could really contribute to stress. And then I think overall, just you know, especially college students that are starting to really pay attention to what's going on in the world, they wake up and they check the news media.

[00:08:29] You don't even know what the state of the world is going to be in the sense of like, our, you know, our government leaders right now, we're not really feeling confident in that. and that keeps kind of a really, uh, almost a sense of unease about the future. A little bit of distrust, uh, where. I think that that just kind of contributes to this overall feeling of anxiety about the future.

[00:08:54] When you have that in certainty, that fear in the, the lack of [00:09:00] security and trust in the. Government that's supposed to be kind of taking care of things, so,

[00:09:05] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:09:05] right. It's like, so, so students are getting it from all angles, like maybe some pressure and stress from home, maybe financial pressure that they put on themselves to perform.

[00:09:15] And then just, you know, society as a whole right now with social media and the interconnectedness. It's like both a blessing and a curse. I feel like, you know, to be so connected with people in a way that we never have been before, but it. You know, comes with its downfalls of, like you said, social comparison, and you go on Instagram and you see like, this person's going here for spring break, but I'm not doing anything.

[00:09:36] And like, this person's life seems perfect. And so,

[00:09:38] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:09:38] yeah. And it's almost like that paradox of, you know, we're, we're so ultra connected, but. How connected are we really in a real heartfelt sense, like it's almost like people are so connected on a superficial sense now, but we're lacking really deep connections, which is leading to like increase levels of

[00:09:57] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:09:57] loneliness and anxiety and depression and, [00:10:00] yeah,

[00:10:00] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:10:00] absolutely.

[00:10:00] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:10:00] So why do you see meditation as an effective way to manage stress.

[00:10:07] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:10:07] Yeah. See, I think meditation is a really powerful tool and it's really exciting that a lot of the students on campus are getting interested in using this tool. like kind of in a nutshell, it, it changes the way you think. You know, it changes the way you perceive the world.

[00:10:24] It changes the way how you perceive your own stress in the sense that it's not going to just like wipe away your stress, you know, meditate and all your stress is going to be gone. Like, no, that's not really how it works. But. When we have stressful things, you know, stressful events are going to keep happening.

[00:10:42] We're not going to stop those events from happening. But how do we handle those events? You know, how do we kind of roll with the punches? Like I love this quote that Judson brewer uses when he teaches mindfulness. He's one of the leaders in the field, but he says, you know, that you can't stop the wave, but you could learn how to [00:11:00] surf.

[00:11:00] So I think that that's kind of what, what mindfulness teaches us in meditation helps us with and in really, like in the. There's all different levels of mindfulness and meditation practice, but kind of at the most basic level, a lot of times you learn to work with the breath, right? So if we could answer this question about how meditation can help you manage stress from like a physiological level too, right?

[00:11:25] So if you're working with your breath and you're taking these long, deep, smooth breaths, you're breathing in and out through your nose. That's going to trigger like a whole cascade of physiological events inside of your body. It's going to help rebalance your nervous system, get you out of your kind of fight or flight that we're kind of constantly being in, you know, every time we get the ping on the phone, this and that, and you know, just kind of constantly on this, on edge, you know, kind of baseline levels of anxiety.

[00:11:52] So, so we're kind of resetting the nervous system by taking time out. Physiologically [00:12:00] through the breath. we're lowering cortisol levels, stress hormones inside the body. Hmm. and the breath is kind of like this window into our nervous system. Like it's our window into controlling different physiological mechanisms inside of our body too, that like you know, sometimes when you're teaching students, I'm like, could you just, could you lower your blood pressure right now on commands?

[00:12:22] And they look at me like, uh. Oh, what are you crazy and I'm like, okay, well can you slow down your heart rate then and commands? And they're like, I'm like a try. I said, well, could you take long, deep, smooth breaths? They're like, Oh yeah, I could do that. Well, by taking long, deep, smooth breaths and you lengthen out the exhale.

[00:12:46] That's triggering the release of nitric oxide, which is help dilating your blood vessels, which is helping bring more oxygen or blood pressure, slowing down your heart rate. So you're actually like getting into all of these deep [00:13:00] mechanisms inside your body. By breathing nice and deep. So that's a pretty powerful tool.

[00:13:06] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:13:06] And is it, correct me if I'm wrong, there's like physiological changes that happen to your brain, like over a period of time. Using meditation, right?

[00:13:17] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:13:17] Yes. Yeah. Those are some of the most exciting studies to me. The ones that show the physiological changes to their brain. Yeah. I love those studies when they look at MRIs and they look at, so, so some of that research first came out from Sara Lazar's research lab at Harvard, and she's one of the people that we actually partner with in our, in our research lab here at Yukon. And her initial studies I generated, like those time magazine covers that say, grow more gray matter by meditating, you know, and you're like, Whoa, how do I do that?

[00:13:52] So what her research first looked at was it compared longterm meditators to just [00:14:00] normal, healthy aging. so looking at it, so across aging, our brains actually shrink. Like that's normal. Okay. Kind of startling or something. [00:14:13] It usually startles people when they first say that, okay, so that's a little like aging, like after age 50 onward, start to lose some, and the prefrontal cortex starts to shrink and continue shrinking with age.

[00:14:25] That's normal. Healthy aging. Okay. And then they look at longterm meditators. And their brains actually don't drink. Whoa. Yeah.

[00:14:35] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:14:35] That's so cool. And longterm meditators being like people who have done it for like every day for 20 years.

[00:14:43] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:14:43] Yeah, yeah. We're talking. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:14:47] Okay. Yeah. So that was the first study.

[00:14:50] The next study was like, okay, well that's great. You know, and how do we know it's really from meditation? Because those people are probably eating healthier too and doing other things. Well. [00:15:00] Now let's do an eight week study where, and that's the typical meditation study. So all these like benefits that you hear about like laundry lists of benefits set.

[00:15:10] Oh, meditation and mindfulness could help you reduce stress, reducing anxiety. Yeah, exactly. It goes on and on and on and on. Most of those studies are done in people that have completed an eight week mindfulness intervention where they're being, you know, meeting with their group, doing meditation every day for eight weeks, not, you know, it could be a few minutes each day, you know, but it's, it's a pretty substantial amount.

[00:15:39] So that's important I think, to keep in mind when you talk about the benefits of meditation, that those, all those benefits are associated with a daily practice. So that's, that's gonna be a key take home, you know? But but back to the brain. So what they do with that, with this, the followup study to that was, and they teach people meditation for eight weeks [00:16:00] and look at what's going on, like look at different areas of the brain.

[00:16:03] And they see that the regions of the brain that are associated with. Managing emotions and executive function, like, you know, all these kind of key areas of the brain memory. These areas of the brain are getting stronger in a sense, after a meditation, uh, intervention. So, so that's powerful in the sense that it shows that those, those differences that you see in the longterm meditators now we see that we could actually change.

[00:16:33] Yeah, there's the shape of the brain in the sense of we can build up the muscle, like actually building up muscle mass and carriers of the brain for emotion regulation, mental processing. and we also see like more functional connectivity in those regions as well.

[00:16:48] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:16:48] How long or what, what is the period of time that somebody would regularly need to practice meditation before they start to see like even the most minimal changes like that?

[00:16:59] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:16:59] Yes. [00:17:00] So that's a great question and it's kind of like the million dollar question, I think in terms of like, you know, at what level are we measuring, you know, and we're looking at MRI scans, but I'd say like what's more important is to like kind of back that up and say like.

[00:17:13] In my study that I did here at Yukon, I had college students meditate for five or 10 minutes a day, every day for a month. Which really meant that most of them did it like four days a week, five days a week for maybe five or 10 minutes. Okay. Cause we had them, you know, check in with that. And. Almost all of them saw changes in terms of the first change that was reported by most of them.

[00:17:40] Like meaning first meeting, like within a couple of days that they, they feel changes is in their sleep. It's easier to sleep. I fall asleep easier. One person even mentioned I, I haven't slept a full night's sleep the whole time I've been at college and I just, I learned I slept through the night.

[00:17:57] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:17:57] That's crazy in a good way.

[00:18:00] [00:18:00] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:18:00] Yeah. Yeah. So sleep is kind of one of those initial things that people might notice. . And then with, in our study, we measured pre post changes in anxiety, stress, depression, resilience, emotion regulation, all those were statistically significant. And that was one month of practice for just a small, you know, five minutes a day.

[00:18:22] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:18:22] Seems very . Like attainable, like it's not out of reach. So, but, so how would students begin to incorporate meditation and mindfulness in their everyday life?

[00:18:33] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:18:33] Yeah, so I asked that question to my daughter because she's a student and and I want to just read you her answer to that because I think hers, she, she's got a little insight into that.

[00:18:46] So her first thing was, I would recommend starting slowly such as five minutes a day. I think by jumping right into it and forcing yourself to meditate for some extended amount of time, you're going to get off on the wrong foot and it could cause you to [00:19:00] dislike or resent the meditation. But begin slowly and really emphasize the time that you set aside for meditation is really meant for bettering yourself.

[00:19:10] And I also recommend taking it seriously. So I think what she's getting at there is like, I know when she started her practice, she really held herself accountable. and she was using one of the apps, a 10% happier app, which is the one that I used in this study. But you know, there's tons of apps out there.

[00:19:27] So I don't think, you know, one app is necessarily better than the other. It's kind of finding something that works for you. Is really key, you know, so find a practice that you enjoy doing, uh, is step number one, right? Maybe find a regular time of day to incorporate that is maybe step number two, which for different people is going to work at different times.

[00:19:49] I think one of the, one of the things that I know students have problems with is they'll say, Oh, I fall asleep every time I meditate. And I'm like. Well, where are you [00:20:00] meditating? Well, I'm a meditating, lying down in bed. I know. You know, and so if you want to fall asleep better, maybe that's a great strategy, but if you're looking to focus

better or you know, kind of depending where what you're trying to get out of it, you kind of structure things a little bit differently.

[00:20:19] And the students that really, I think had the biggest benefit in my study, more the ones that. Had that, well, first of all, that practice more like in the middle of the day or first thing in the morning sometime when they were awake and they, they felt a shift in their relationship to their self. Like meaning that harsh self judgment that we constantly bombarded on themselves.

[00:20:48] It's the students that said, you know, I've always been so hard on myself. I'm always pushing myself. I'm always, you know, trying to stay up all night long to study, and this helped me realize that that's actually not that [00:21:00] effective. That I'm, you know, I could actually be more effective when I take better care of myself.

[00:21:06] That's interesting. When I, when I take breaks, when I set aside some time for self care and to reset. And so the students that really got that kind of self care piece, those that are the ones that would, that were saying after this study. Like, this study changed my life. You know, they, they were the ones who really felt like really big impacts.

[00:21:27] but I think that was because of, you know, how they went about their practice in a sense too, that they were you know, doing it every day, not, you know, they're only doing it five, 10 minutes. but really committing to that and holding themselves accountable. And one thing that's important, I think with accountability in, especially with.

[00:21:50] With college students too, that that demographic is like kind of balancing accountability with compassion. You know, that we're not like cutting [00:22:00] yourself some Slack. Yeah, exactly. Okay. I missed yesterday. That's okay. It's not a big deal in the sense that I'm not going to beat myself up. But I'm still going to hold myself accountable tomorrow.

[00:22:11] So really kind of having that, that kind of accountable yet kind, you know, firm and friendly. Yeah. Firm and friendly like that. That's an important mindset, I think, to go into it. and a lot of students, you know, when they first start a meditation practice, there'll be like, am I doing it right? You know, Oh, I don't feel anything yet.

[00:22:33] And you know, and that. Like, well, you don't go to the gym once and expect to like have some super strong bicep immediately. You know, like you just have to commit to the practice, stick with it. And in terms of doing it right. Maybe not think so hard about that part. but there are like, that's why it's nice to go to like the group class on [00:23:00] Mondays because you could ask questions, you know, you couldn't voice your concerns and then you hear like, Oh, wait, everybody else.

[00:23:05] And the room is worried about whether or not I'm doing it right too. And so what really is the concern there? And then we can kind of get to the bottom of that a little bit, which a lot of times people, you know, sometimes people feel like more stressed after they meditate. Oh my God. Yeah. Yeah. That could happen sometimes.

[00:23:23] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:23:23] Is that like seems, does that seem to be the most common question or concern that you got is like, am I doing it right?

[00:23:29] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:23:29] It's a very common question. yeah. Especially when you know. We're, we want to do everything right in our lives, right? We're just striving for perfection and all these different ways, or like, how do I know when I'm doing it?

[00:23:42] Right? I don't know. You know? so, so I think with. With that. It's just kind of just keep it simple, keep it basic in terms of, you know, you're just trying to anchor the minds and, but it's just how you do that. You know, if you do that with this kind of harsh self judgment, [00:24:00] or you could do that just with kindness and compassion and every time you notice your mind wandering off and you're thinking about, Oh, I'm worrying about my test again.

[00:24:08] So the students that say like, it makes me more stressed. That's because, well, first of all, they feel like. From, this is from what they said. They said, you know, I feel like I'm wasting my time. I should be studying right now. I'm taking five minutes to myself. So that's kind of a mindset. First of all, right?

[00:24:25] Like I'm not valuing self care. I'm not valuing this time to resets. I need to to study more, you know? So that kind of needs a little bit of a mindset shift to place a little bit more value on this practice. so that's important. I think.

[00:24:44] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:24:44] I remember when I, when I graduated from college, I started doing yoga and we would do the, you know, a short meditation at the end and beginning of every yoga class.

[00:24:54] And I would get so frustrated because I was, I would think to myself, I might just supposed to be empty. I'm supposed to [00:25:00] not, not have a million thoughts floating around. Like, what am I going to eat for dinner and over? What do I have to do at work tomorrow? And I just could not. Get these thoughts out of my head and I, and so I relate to that a little bit of being frustrated and like, I'm not doing this right.

[00:25:13] What's wrong with me? I can't get my mind to be quiet. So do you have any words of advice?

[00:25:19] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:25:19] Yeah, that is very, very typical. That's totally normal too. And with that, it's because what the mind's job, right? What's the mind's job is to think, right? Right. The mind wants to think and when left to its own devices, it's going to think about all these things it has to worry about in the future. In the past, I should've done this.

[00:25:37] Yeah. And they actually, you know, looked at what the brain does when not told to do anything under an MRI machine. And they see, Oh, it's all this like kind of.

[00:25:52] Self-referential processing where we go kind of go over and over and things that we could have done, should have done, should do worry about, you know, all that.

[00:26:00] And they call that the default mode network because that really is our default way of being, is to kind of have that kind of messy mind stuff going on.

[00:26:07] Right. so meditation helps us learn how to step out of that. But at first, what actually you're doing is you're saying paying attention to your thoughts. Well, I'm paying attention to that fact that my thoughts are all over the place and I'm worrying about all this stuff. Right? So that's where the non-judgment piece comes into play.

[00:26:28] So S and the noting practice. So exactly like you said, you're in your yoga class, you're trying to relax, and you notice that you're, what were you thinking about? Tell me again.

[00:26:38] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:26:38] Okay. What, what was I gonna make for dinner? When was I going to go to the groceries? Like just the, just the normal things,

[00:26:44] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:26:44] chatter, chatter.

[00:26:45] So yeah. What am I going to have for dinner tonight that comes in? So right at that moment, as soon as you notice that thought, what would you do?

[00:26:56] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:26:56] I would, you know, spend a [00:27:00] couple seconds going through the options of what's for dinner and then be like, stop. This is ridiculous. And try to pull myself back to the class.

[00:27:06] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:27:06] Okay. Perfect example. [00:27:11] Because you added this extra piece in there that we would wanna like cut out. Okay. All right, so you notice, first of all, you got caught up in this story. So what's for dinner? And you started like making lists and all that, so, so as soon as you notice, you want to catch it immediately and not keep going in that story, and then you just want to bring it right back to your anchor point, which means you have to have an anchor point.

[00:27:36] Okay? So maybe it's going to be your breath. Maybe it's going to be counting the breath. you know, maybe it's the sensation of the breath or you know, you get to pick what your anchor point is, but the thing that you added in there was you noticed you kept going with it a little longer and then you beat yourself up for it too.

[00:27:55] Okay. So you added all that self-judgment into there, [00:28:00] so, so it's like, what's for dinner up, thinking about dinner again, back to the breath. Yeah. Simple noting practice, noting, returning to the anchor, uh, noting returning to the anchor, like really, really simple. And then that kind of gets us out of this habit, which we've paved in our brain.

[00:28:19] Like, think about all of this as neuro-plasticity here at work, right? So we've paved anytime, you know, the mind wanders and we catch it. What do we do? We get mad at ourselves, right? So we've paved that that. Pathway. Really good. Right? We've paved all these anxiety pathways really good too, you know, because we practice getting anxious over things all the time.

[00:28:40] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:28:40] So it's like flipping the script on your own brain.

[00:28:43] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:28:43] Yeah. yeah. So it's practicing, just simply going back to the breath, you know? No drama, no trying to do it yourself.

[00:28:53] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:28:53] So do you have any recommendations for resources like books or blogs. That students can utilize to learn [00:29:00] more, especially as it pertains to, you know, academic successor, or even just how to get started.

[00:29:08] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:29:08] Yes. So I've been working on compiling list of resources actually that I. Half on my website. Oh, great. Yeah. My research website, which I can read off to you right now, and maybe you could put in the notes too, but it's sharp.uconn.edu/meditation-resources.

[00:29:28] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:29:28] Easy enough.

[00:29:28] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:29:28] Okay. Yeah, and so on there I explain the key elements of mindfulness, acceptance, non-judgment, kindness, noting like the explain kind of how those pieces work. I give instructions on how to meditate and there's links for guided meditations on there. Um. There's a few that I made myself on there, and there's some from YouTube on there. and there's suggestions for apps.

[00:29:56] I've got some videos about meditation on there, and there's some [00:30:00] interviews with students here at UConn that participated in the meditation study are on there as well. Nice. So, yeah, there's. That's a great place to start. I'm just trying to put all the resources in one place.

[00:30:10] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:30:10] Yeah, it's like a one stop shop.

[00:30:12] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:30:12] Yeah, and I have a personal favorite podcast that I like to listen to is the, I'm 10% happier podcast. Have you heard of that one?

[00:30:20] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:30:20] No, I haven't. I know about the 10% happier app that has the guided meditations. I didn't know that they had their own podcasts.

[00:30:26] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:30:26] Yeah. Yeah. So that podcast I really liked the first hundred episodes or so. It's up to like a lot higher than that now, but the first hundred episodes, Dan Harris is the one that hosts that. And he interviewed some of the top researchers in meditation around the world. He interviewed the Dalai Lama. He interviewed you know, longterm meditators that have had their brains scanned, and they're the happiest person in the world according to their brain scan, you know, so he is, so basically, he kind of

[00:30:58] After he, he maxed [00:31:00] out all of the people that were the best people to interview, I think, honestly. And now he's interviewing like his interviews expanded wider now, which is why I would suggest going back to those first hundred of them, because those are the really, really great people to interview. So to hear it, you know, really from the source.

[00:31:17] So cool. It's really neat. Yeah. Check it out.

[00:31:20] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:31:20] So no pressure. But if you feel open to it, do you want to lead me and Emma and our listeners in like a just a two to three minute quick meditation so they can get an idea of what the, of course.

[00:31:31] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:31:31] Okay. Awesome. Yeah, all right, so before we start, okay.

[00:31:37] It's important to adjust your positioning so. I like to sit up tall and put both feet flat on the floor, maybe put my hand on my lap. And the reason that you sit up really tall is because we talked about that breathing piece being key, right? So if we're going to take a long, deep breaths. To trigger that relaxation response in the body.

[00:31:58] It's important to [00:32:00] be able to use your full lung capacity. Okay, so we'll, we'll sit up nice and tall, and if you're comfortable closing your eyes, go ahead and close your eyes and take a big deep breath in and a big sigh out

[00:32:18] and just take a few more big deep breaths at your own pace.

[00:32:31] And just continue breathing steady through your nose. Now, if you're able to and just pay attention, just pay attention to whatever it is that you notice the most right now. Maybe it's something inside of your body. Yeah. Maybe it's something going on around you.

[00:32:58] We're just checking in [00:33:00] with whatever you notice right now. Just be curious. You're like, huh, that's interesting that I could hear my heart beating right now, or whatever it is that you notice and just continue to breathe a little bit deeper and a little bit smoother. See if you could try to lengthen the exhale

[00:33:26] and begin softening all the muscles in the face. Just release your forehead, soften your eyelids, continue to breathe nice and deep and fall as you released through the hinge of the jaw. Maybe even let the back of the tongue widen in the mouth

[00:33:56] and invite the neck to soften [00:34:00] and just release any tension that you're holding in your shoulders, down your back, down your arms. Just let your arms be heavy and still breathing in and out nice and deep and fall.

[00:34:18] And just beginning to let your legs feel heavy. I'm beginning to notice your feet on the grounds or anywhere else that you're connected to the grounds.

[00:34:33] I'm here now. I am letting go

[00:34:39] softening and relaxing tension.

[00:34:48] Well, I'm going to begin to anchor our minds in a moment now, now that we've relaxed the body a little bit by focusing on counting the breath, [00:35:00] because that gives the mind something to do. So just follow along with me the best you can, and it's okay if you're still breathing in. When I say hold or if you're still breathing out.

[00:35:11] When I say hold, that's fine. I'm just following along with with some ease. Here we go. We'll breathe in two, three, four and hold two, three, four and breathe out. Two,

three, four, and hold two, three, four. Breathe in two. Three four and hold two, three, four and breathe out two, three, four and hold two, three, four.

[00:35:49] Breathe in two, three, four and hold two, three, four and breathe out two, three, [00:36:00] four or whatever your account is. And you're going to try that on your own in a moment, just counting to whatever your account is, or if you prefer, you could just say in on the inhale and out on the exhale if the counting gets to be too much.

[00:36:19] So go ahead and begin now just for one minute on your own.

[00:37:10] [00:37:00] Now. Maybe you want to continue counting the breadth if that's helping you focus and relax and anchor the mind. Or maybe you just want to focus on the sensation of the breath. Some people even like to visualize the breath by visualizing it in the form of color, like breathing in the color green, breathing out like an orangy red, whatever color you like.

[00:37:45] So maybe just trying that now for a moment.

[00:38:17] [00:38:00] And just honoring, taking this time for yourself, honoring, taking this time to reset and to come back into balance. Knowing that we could often be more, more productive and more effective when we take just a little time for the self care. That the more peaceful we feel on the inside, the more peaceful the where the world often appears on the outside.

[00:38:51] So as you're finishing up your meditation practice, maybe bring your chin down to your chest and just take a moment to tune into your body. [00:39:00] Maybe a big sigh and some gentle stretches here. Noticing how you're feeling right now without judgment. Just noticing.

[00:39:18] A lot of times we try to be a certain way, like this is supposed to make me feel this way. You know, meditation is really about just being with what is practicing being with what is.

[00:39:37] Whenever you're ready, you can open your eyes, maybe stretch your arms up, maybe take a little spinal twist, being yawn whenever you need.

[00:39:55] Thanks for trying it out.

[00:39:57] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:39:57] Yeah, thank you. That was so great. [00:40:00] It's nice to reset. We're in the middle of the day here, so it's nice to take a moment to reset.

[00:40:06] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:40:06] Yeah. Sometimes I noticed that like, um. When I go to meditate in the middle of the day, you know, I have everything that's happened so far that day, and it's almost, you know, it starts to build, starts to kind of grow on you and get to give you that little agitation.

[00:40:21] And then I take a couple minutes to meditate and then when I walk out in the meditation room, like what was even bothering me, I don't even remember. Yeah. It's just,

it's just doesn't seem. That's big of a deal anymore. You know, it's still there. It didn't go away, but it just doesn't seem like as big of a deal.

[00:40:43] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:40:43] Well, thank you so much for your time. Are there any final thoughts that you might want to share?

[00:40:50] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:40:50] I guess just emphasizing, you know, finding what works for you and knowing it doesn't have to be a one size fit, all that, you know, [00:41:00] sometimes when people are just starting out with a new practice that they find, you know.

[00:41:06] Maybe my run is my meditation, you know? Maybe that's my my time, but it, but it's really about the intention, right? So if your intention when you go on a run is to really take that time to clear the thoughts. And every time you start making your to do list that you catch your mind and you just bring it back to.

[00:41:25] You know, that kind of breathing white space, you know, noticing nature around you if you're running outside. so, so you could really bring this into lots of different practices, and even just like the mindfulness practice, which is kind of different. I'll just separate that from the meditation seated, you know, seated meditation is kind of what we just did, right?

[00:41:46] Yep. But when you walk out of here, you could. Notice the trees. Notice what the clouds look like in the sky. Notice the little squirrels. So that's kind of about [00:42:00] noticing what's going on in your life right around you as it's happening. And that's more than mindfulness practice where we practice bringing that into our daily life, like practice being fully present in each moment as it occurs.

[00:42:13] Because we spend so much of our time on autopilot, right? And so much of our time with our mind wandering off somewhere else. So then, then actually being here, and there's one of my favorite studies is a mind wandering study that says how, how when people, you know that our minds wander like more than half of the day, our mind is off somewhere else.

[00:42:31] But when we're fully present and engaged with whatever it is we're doing, whether it's a boring task like washing the dishes, doesn't matter, but we're happier and more satisfied when we're fully present. So kind of practicing, bringing that full presence into your life over and over, you know, a hundred times a day, even if it's as simple as like, I'm buying a bagel from the cashier and I'm going to look at them, you know, and I'm going to engage.

[00:42:58] And just in that moment [00:43:00] right there. So just kind of capturing as many moments almost of our lives. So that's really where it brings a richness to our lives.

[00:43:07] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:43:07] Well, thank you so much for sharing your time and your thoughts and your research with us. We really appreciate you being on our podcast and sharing this with students.

[00:43:16] **Rebecca Acabchuk:** [00:43:16] Well, thank you for having me.

[00:43:26] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:43:26] So you just heard us listening and talking to Becky Acabchuk . And we just wrapped up a little meditation session. I hope that you are able to participate in, found it, you know, useful and relaxing and centering. We are in the midst of a very busy day here at UConn. And so I just feel so fortunate that we got to take time out of our day to have that experience.

[00:43:51] And honestly, it just brought me back down to earth to have that midday meditation session. But Emma, were there [00:44:00] certain things that you found most interesting about our conversation that you maybe want to talk about?

[00:44:04] **Emma Bjorngard:** [00:44:04] One thing that stood out to me was how she distinguished between meditation and mindfulness because they're often lumped together. I kind of thought they were not, yeah, the same. I guess. But then thinking about how to be present more present in the moment, like all throughout your day and just thinking about like the environment and perceiving things maybe in more detail, you know, and just take that time for yourself and not letting your thoughts just wander all over the place all the time like that. That could be something very beneficial.

[00:44:36] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:44:36] Yeah, it's so hard or at least I think it's hard sometimes to be present. It's like, it's like kind of a buzz word or like a buzz theme nowadays, but the reality is like, we're on our phones and you know, they're, I have experience where people are talking to me and I'm like, Oh, let me just respond to the text really quick.

[00:44:54] And it's like, no, like you can just take a minute, be engaged in this conversation and [00:45:00] then get back to that person or whatever on your phone later on. And so it's, it's challenging and it takes, you know, an intentional effort.

[00:45:08] **Emma Bjorngard:** [00:45:08] Something that I thought about when she was talking about that too. was that okay - speaking about podcasts, like sometimes I am listening to a podcast and I'm trying to relax, but I'm also checking like my Instagram or reading tweets or something and I'm like, Oh gosh, I just rewind 15 seconds over and over again. And then I'm just in the end, not feeling relaxed. But I'm like stressed, so I'm going to try and be more intentional about like focusing on what I'm doing and not like adding in a bunch of different things at the same time.

[00:45:40] **Kayla Hogrefe:** [00:45:40] Another thing I thought was interesting that, you know, we've heard now a couple times, is about this concept of neuroplasticity and how you know, people can train and retrain their brains and it's almost like. Intimidating to think about. What ways have I trained my brain? All right. You know that [00:46:00] maybe it needs some conscious undoing.

[00:46:02] So I'm going to look more into neuroplasticity and it's, I just find that stuff so fascinating. I could've talked to Becky all afternoon probably. But anyway, I hope that you listening, check out Becky's website. We'll put the link in the podcast notes, and I encourage you to, to see if you can't make meditation a part of your daily or weekly, you know, part of your life and, and see the benefits.

[00:46:28] And we'd love to hear from students about how meditation and practicing mindfulness has positively impacted them. So anything else? That's it. All right. Enjoy the rest of your day. Thanks for listening.