

Transcript Episode 18

Introduction:

You are listening to the UnDeniably Well podcast hosted by the University of Delaware's Employee Health and Wellbeing team. Keep listening to discover ways to be your best self each and every day.

On this episode of UnDeniably Well, we will be talking about personal limitations; how to uncover your superpower; and why you should be vocal about asking for support. In our post-pandemic world, we now have access to empathetic leaders, workplace accommodations, and a broader understanding of how to support individuals living with chronic conditions.

Ryan Shuler:

Welcome to this episode of UnDeniably Well. My name is Ryan Shuler, and I am the Associate Director of the Employee Health and Wellbeing program at the University of Delaware. Today, I am absolutely thrilled to have Caitlin Tharp with me. She is one of our grad students in the program.

She received her bachelor's in 2020 from UD in Applied Nutrition, and is currently a Master's of Health Promotion student who will be graduating at the end of this May. During her time in the Master's program, she has worked as a graduate assistant at Employee Health and Wellbeing. And she has been the person behind the scenes of the UnDeniably Well podcast since its launch in the fall of 2021. Her lifelong passion has been to help people, and as she embarks on this next chapter of her life, she is excited to see what entails. Caitlin, I am so happy to have you here. Welcome.

Caitlin Tharp:

Thank you so much, Ryan. It's very interesting to be on this end of everything.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah, Caitlin does all of our editing, all of our, even just coordination of setting the podcast up. So, it's really nice to have her, well you can't all see her. I can see her, but her face and her voice and listened to her story. And today, really we are talking about, sort of this concept of personal limitations, strengths, and weaknesses, and how to sort of move forward in this way. So Caitlin, if you feel comfortable, I would love to hear some of your story around this.

Caitlin Tharp:

Yeah, so, when I was 13 years old, I woke up one day with a headache and that headache never went away. And that was my first experience with chronic pain. So back when I first started experiencing that chronic pain, it was not super acceptable. When I would go to doctors, they would tell me a lot of time that it was due to hysterics that I maybe needed to see like a psychologist. And actually it was recommended at one point that I be put in like a day program and be taken out of school because there was something wrong with me. And, at home there was sort of a lot of like this pressure to mask that there were things going on and to not talk about it. But I will say my mom, who is like my best friend, she always advocated that were options for me that this was not my fault, that this was just something that we could live with and deal with. And that I could get through it. And I was a great person,

regardless of everything going on. So because of that, like shame and backlash and just not understanding, I would often like push myself to fit into spaces that were not designed for me to succeed as I was. And as a result, I often experienced a lot of burnout.

I had this pattern every year in school where I would do great in the fall. I would get through. I would almost have perfect attendance. And then by around February, I would stop. I couldn't do it. I would miss tons of school, and it actually resulted in me leaving both the eighth grade and my sophomore year of high school, due to pain and I was bedridden at the time. I could barely function, and I was homeschooled by my mom, who's actually a teacher, which is very fortunate. I'm very lucky that that was the circumstance that I had. Then when I switched to public school for my last two years of high school, they have a lot of stuff in place for people with disabilities. So I actually utilized it, and that was the first time that I had accommodations.

And that was the first time that I actually really felt like I could succeed. There were things in place that I could do, that I wasn't the same as everyone, but I was able to reach the same milestones as everyone. , and then when I came to college at UD, I got accommodations to the DSS. And now in grad school, I have accommodations for my employment here as a grad assistant and for my academics.

Ryan Shuler:

I really appreciate you being so honest and open with that. I think that there's a lot of people who probably can relate to this. I think you have very unique story, but I think a lot of people will hear themselves in what you're saying. I love that you say that the spaces were not designed for you.

And I think that, like we have talked about this, so much of this is language and how things are framed and sort of society's force perception on you. Like you have shared with me. You know, growing up, you thought of yourself as a sick person. Well no, you, you had a disability and that's what it was. And as, as you had accommodations have supported you through that, you've seen growth. You've seen positivity, you've seen success. So, much of this conversation really is, it's not really your own personal limitation, it's that you're in spaces that are not designed for you to succeed, which really is an equity. It's an equity thing. So I love that you sort of bring this design of spaces up because it's so important from a parent perspective, you know, how can I help my children in this way? I think of a manager perspective, how can I help my team in this way? Would you share or be willing to share a little more about what the accommodation process looks like for people who are listening?

Caitlin Tharp:

Yeah. So for both academics and for employment, they were very similar. So, sort of explaining both. So if someone listening is also a student and needs accommodations, the process is pretty much the same. There's a form at the DSS. You should reach out to them. They're great. They'll be in contact with you, but you get your doctor to fill it out and sign it and then you give it to them and they review it with you and they see like, what is reasonable? Because, you know, what you might request might not be within the ability of that position, but they can work with you to make it so it works for both like your manager and your team and yourself.

Ryan Shuler:

And that's a great point to bring up. So let's say that you are. A police officer who was required to be on campus, you probably are not going to be granted accommodations to work remotely every single day. However, in your case where we have flexibility to do remote work, you know, your accommodations allow you to do that and allow you to be a lot more successful. So I think for those listening, in sort of this equity conversation, really think of if your school or your work is causing you to be unsuccessful, again, because the space is not designed for you have that conversation with your manager or with a colleague or with a parent and say, I think I could be better if, and really reach out DSS is Disability Support Services, reach out to them and have the conversation to see what your options are because there really are so many different options, you know, as Caitlin shared that, you can really set yourself up for success.

So I'm curious, Caitlin, you talk about your mom sort of advocating for you. And reassuring that, you know, you're a good person and you can do this. And to me, that kind of goes back to personal perception and the power of language. How did that sort of shape, and really over the last two years of knowing you, I have seen significant change and growth. So since all of this started, I'm curious just to hear your perspective on, you know how your perception of yourself changed, does the way you talk to yourself sound different. What does that look like now versus a few years ago?

Caitlin Tharp:

When I first started experiencing pain and just some of my other issues, I kind of thought that they would go away. So there wasn't a lot of dealing with it, cause it was like, oh, we'll push through, and when I say we, I mean my family, because it affected everyone. When you have a child that is not well, when you have a friend or family member who's not well, it affects everyone. We just kind of thought that we would get through it. But then as the years came and like I declined at certain points. It turned into, well, maybe I just need to learn how to live with this. And it was hard. It was very hard because it's not always pleasant to live in a lot of pain, and it's not always understood by others, but it's surprising how many people... Well, I should say it was surprising to me when I started sharing some of the things that I was going through, how many people actually were there to support me. So I had thought that I shouldn't share, because I thought that I was broken and that no one should have to accommodate me because I was the problem, but it's not really true. People want to make sure you feel welcome in a space. People want to make sure that you succeed, if you genuinely want to yourself, and I'll say this really happened over the past few years since I started grad school. Before that I didn't really share. I didn't share it all.

I just kind of got through it myself, but I started surrounding myself with people who wanted the best for me. When I shared what I needed, they were like, okay, we can work with that. Like, let's get you in contact with all these people. I will say there are days that I still feel like I have limitations. Because there are days that are worse than others. But I look back at the amount of growth that I've made since 2008, I didn't think I'd be anything. I honestly didn't know if I'd be here.

Ryan Shuler:

You're making me think of two things. The first, when you talk about this, it really just showcases for me the power of empathy. So, you know, I do not live with chronic pain. I can't even pretend to understand what that is like for you on a day-to-day basis, how you're navigating work, school, relationship. I can't say that I've been in your shoes. However, I can say that your feelings are valid for this, and your

requests for accommodations are valid. So just because I don't understand, it doesn't mean that it invalidates it. So, I think when we're sort of thinking of our relationships, especially at work, if we have a colleague, if you're a manager and you have a staff member, if you're a parent and you have a child, just because you don't understand it. It's not your lived experience, doesn't take away from the validity of this experience on someone else. So I think so much of this, so much of these, all these conversations, we have really come back to empathy and just sort of being able to be bigger than yourself and say, okay, I don't live this way. I don't need this accommodate. But I know Caitlin does. And I can say personally, seeing Caitlin's work with this accommodation. Caitlin produces excellent work. These podcasts are fabulous, every time we do them. All of her work, the Wellbeing Weeklies come out of Caitlin. Her work is good because she is in a situation supports her to do good work. Now if we just said, you know, push through your pain, come into the office every day. Your work is not going to be nearly at the quality that it is now. So again, if you're thinking from a workplace perspective, how can you support others in your team in this empathetic way where really it's just supporting them as individuals to give them what they need to be successful.

Caitlin Tharp:

Yeah. And I have to say like, because of COVID, and not that COVID is great. It was not great. It is not great, but it allowed for flexible, remote work at the time. I mean, we all had to do it. And I personally had never had a job prior to coming to grad school. I personally did not feel like I could have a regular job because of the way that I felt most of the time, but working from home allowed me to see that I can do so many things. And fortunately, again, because of the accommodations, we keep saying that, but it has allowed me to remain working. And I hope in the future to use these kinds of tools to continue to grow and progress in my career, and I have, you know, zoom to thank for that.

Ryan Shuler:

And I think we are all like zoomed out, but really it has opened the door to so many things. I just, again, I keep kind of pulling this back to the workplace just since it's, you know, we're Employee Health and Wellbeing, but I continue to hear across campus that teams are being put in situations that may not be as supportive as they could be. The question I would like to pose to those of you listening to the managers, listening, are you not engaging in this remote work, accommodations work because it's new to you and you don't know how to do it, or is it really because operationally you can't. And if the real answer is operationally, it's not going to function, then that's is what it is. It's not going to function, but I continue to hear from so many teams that could have so much potential in this, but leadership is not willing to try something new or maybe just needs more support. Maybe they need to understand what this really could look like and how it could work. And I think that's what is so powerful about having someone like Caitlin come on the podcast is we're hearing a real-life experience from someone at UD, saying I have personal limitations. I have accommodations and I'm graduating. I'm holding a job. I'm doing all of these great things. It does work. I won't say that it was easy right off the bat. I think we had to sort of work with Caitlin, work with DSS to make sure we were all on the same page. We were all understanding what this meant.

We were all setting expectations, so we could this supportive environment, but still have the needs of Employee Health and Wellbeing met. And I think that that's what it takes. It takes a little hard work at the beginning to figure out what this could look like, but as long as you are open and honest and having these conversations, it really allows for an individual as, Caitlin shared, who may feel that they can't be

successful to really be successful in a new way. So Caitlin helped me understand because I will share personally when... Caitlin was my first experience with an employee with an accommodation. So all of this was new to me. So there may have been a lot of questions I had similar to questions that other managers across campus have. So help me understand, in regards to DSS and legal rights. Are there any sort of protections or things that a manager should or should not know when having this conversation with an employee?

Caitlin Tharp:

Well, when talking with an employee, some individuals may be open to discussing what's going on with them. It depends on what your relationship is or their, you know, their comfortability with it themselves. But you should not ask an individual what their disability is or like why they need these accommodations. I would suggest if there's an issue, talking to the representative for this individual who is in the DSS. They will be much better equipped to address, whatever you may be concerned about. And perhaps the three of you could get together to talk it out

Ryan Shuler:

So the employee or the student has some sort of legal rights to protection is what you're saying that they don't have to fully disclose anything.

Caitlin Tharp:

Right.

Ryan Shuler:

Okay. That's helpful to know. And I'm thinking through the mental health first aid training I just went through, and a lot of this was echoed similar in that training, where if somebody opens up to you to have this conversation, then it's appropriate to engage. But as a manager, I can't just start rapid firing questions at someone as soon as I see the accommodation come across my desk, that's not the appropriate way to navigate this. And I think for those listening, another just resource. So DSS again, Disability Support Services on campus is a fantastic resource to help you navigate. As I love just the way I keep coming back to this, the way you phrase it to have spaces better designed for you to be supportive. So how can we design your workday or your workspace to help you be successful in your job? I just also want to point out that we do have options as a student or as an employee for a leave of absence.

So if you get to a place physically, mentally, whatever your disability, maybe if you feel like it's too much right now to continue, take that leave of absence. I don't think that anybody wants you to continue to push through at the risk of you becoming even more ill or burning out or ending up in a hospital or whatever it may be. So take your leave of absence. You have again, protections around that. You have FMLA protections, where you can again, take your absence, get the care that you need and come back refreshed, or maybe don't come back. Maybe you realize that the space is what's leading to your, you know, mental illness, or chronic illness that the space you're in or the job you're in is making it worse. Maybe the answer is you need to rethink some things. But I think just the bottom line is there is a lot of support, especially at the University for those who are in this situation, and there is a lot of people who wants to help you be successful and want to help you through, to graduate, to get that job, to get that promotion, whatever it may be. There are people here that really do want the best for you.

Caitlin Tharp:

Yeah, I would say that this team in general, I know a lot of people across campus probably have the same sentiment about Employee Health and Wellbeing, but this team has allowed me to find value in myself and to find that I am capable and to really support me. It's been incredible kind of two years of just immense growth.

Ryan Shuler:

Well, even, Caitlin, to hear you say that, to hear you say positive affirmations about yourself, that to me is growth. And I go back to sort of this question about self-talk. So I'm sort of curious what that looks like for you, even in the sense that when we talked about this prior to recording, we talked about it in a sense of a personal limitation, right? But really, is it that you're viewing yourself as having personal limitations or is it that you just understand that your strengths may be different than someone else and that power that language has over you and your perception of yourself, your perception of the word, I'm just sort of curious what the whole concept of language and the words you use. How has that changed your perception?

Caitlin Tharp:

Well, it's actually interesting because like we said, I'm in the Health Promotion field and I've done a little bit of health coaching and I've actually come to find that my experience, and this is going to sound very cheesy. But my experience in the medical field, like as a patient has given me so much insight, and it's almost a super power, working in this field because I know I can completely empathize with people. I understand the fears. I understand the reservations. I understand how difficult everything is to do. Like I have a lot of food allergies that I developed later in life. So I completely changed my diet. I used to have a very severe like exercise intolerance. So I had to work up to being able to exercise. So I understand how difficult things can be. And I really appreciate having that experience because I think that it will be helpful, because my passion is to work with individuals who are like me, who may be struggling, who may be feeling like they can't do anything and kind of working with them to understand, well, these are the things that, maybe physiologically you cannot do. Maybe they are harmful, and not even cannot do. Like if you choose to do them, the repercussions may be negative and you may not want to do that. But you could, you could if you wanted to. But working with individuals to figure out the best way that they can move forward to maintain that sense of wellbeing, while working towards whatever it is their goal is.

Ryan Shuler:

You're making me think too, a lot of just the way our society is structured. And we talk about this in the, know, equity space or the DEI space, it's that you don't realize the structure of society in which white people, men, able-bodied individuals. It's just when you are not in those categories, it becomes very apparent how much harder it is to get to that same end goal. So listening to you, even talking about this, for me, I'm a personal trainer. So exercise is something I take for granted. So even to hear that statement that just getting up and moving is really challenging for some people or maybe hurtful to some people. And it's just that's why I think these conversations are so powerful because it's, it's good for all of us to hear, it's good reminders that not everybody has that same privilege to wake up and put on their shoes and go for a run in the morning or to wake up and get dressed and say, Hey, I'm going to

go to work today. Some people just think they can not do that. And we need to be more cognizant of other ways that we can set people up for success without fitting them into our box. How can we create something new for other people? So thank you for bringing that up. I appreciate that thought for sure.

Caitlin Tharp

And like understanding that it's not a personal failure for not fitting in to those places.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah. That's a great point that you bring, and sort of, I guess, perception on both sides, perception on, if you do not have any type of chronic illness, if you are, you know, overall well to have the perception that am I being inclusive? Am I being supportive? Am I creating spaces that allow people to want to join and to be successful in my space?

Then on the other side, if you are someone living with a condition to have the perception as you do Caitlin, to say that space was not designed for me, do I need to still accomplish the same work in my own way? How can I do it my way to be successful? I just, really think that a lot of this perception and I guess awareness is a better word to use, awareness by all parties that there are options. There are options and there are ways of support and we all just need to be open to it. So Caitlin, this conversation has been informative for me. I hope it has been engaging for listeners. I just want to sort of close it with, if you have one sort of overarching message for people listening, whether it's for people living with a condition or, you know, those not living with the condition, sort of, what would your takeaway message be?

Caitlin Tharp:

I think it would be, don't be afraid to ask for what you need. Because the worst that's going to happen is they're going to say no. And then you'll find out that maybe you don't belong there and then you can leave and you can find a place that's better suited for you. But then best-case scenario, they say yes. And I think that I've learned in this past several years of actually vocalizing the things that I need that most people, if given the time and opportunity, will say yes, and it's not your burden to bear, to just push through, to try and appear, quote, unquote, normal. You have a right to thrive and to live and work and be in a place that supports that for you.

Ryan Shuler:

I love that. I love that so much, and in the sense of someone, you know, living with a condition that maybe will need more support. But even that's just such a powerful takeaway message in general. In your relationships, at work with your kids, with your parents, be vocal and ask for what you need. People are not mind readers. So if you know, you need blank to be successful or to be better, or to be more fulfilled or more empowered ask for that thing. I think that's just such a powerful message. And we ask all of our guests, our final question is Caitlin, what makes you undeniably well?

Caitlin Tharp:

I came up with this question, so you'd think that I would have a really great answer. I think it comes back to social support. So I lived a long time being very alone, being very isolated. And part of that was from some of my chronic conditions, just feeling like I was missing out on a lot of stuff because of decisions

that I made, to quote unquote, protect myself. And I have found so much joy in getting to know people, in relying on people, in knowing that if I'm having a bad day, that I can talk to somebody and maybe they don't make it better, but at least they're there with me. Like my cohort in my grad program has been one of the sole reasons that I've been able to stick out this whole thing. They're so wonderful. And I don't think I ever would have in my life before this moment said that people were the reason that I would be somewhere because I very much saw myself as not liking people, as not relating to people. But if you find the right people, apparently, you can turn into people person.

Ryan Shuler:

Anything is possible.

Caitlin Tharp:

Anything as possible.

Ryan Shuler:

Thank you so much for being on today. I love that we had the opportunity to talk and that you're not just always behind the scenes editing. I think that you have brought so much insight to this conversation and really appreciate your honesty and willingness to be open. I think that more people across campus need to have these open and honest conversations. So I'm hopeful that, you know, for all of those listening, check in with your colleagues, check in with your staff, check in with your kids, ask for what people need be supportive those of you who have needs be vocal, ask for what you need, and understand that there's a whole of people here at UD to support you and help you through and be successful. So thank you, Caitlin, and thank you all for listening and we will talk to you soon.

Outro:

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