

MindFIT Podcast – Meditation as an Antidote to Stress with Dr. Ramona Alaggia Transcript

Lauren Brown:

Hi, and welcome to the University of Toronto's MindFIT lecture series. On this podcast, we discuss the Buddhist roots of mindfulness along with current issues in mindfulness and yoga. My name is Lauren Brown and I'm the mindfulness meditation and yoga program coordinator for the Division of Student Life. Thank you for listening.

All right, before we begin today, I would like to acknowledge this land, which University of Toronto operates on. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and Mississaugas of the Credit. Today this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous peoples from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

I'd like to introduce Dr. Ramona ... Oh, you just told me how to say this now and I've done it again ... Dr. Ramona Alaggia. Have I got that? Great. Thank you. Dr. Ramona Alaggia is here today leading a lecture titled Meditation as an Antidote to Stress: A Trauma-Informed Perspective.

Dr. Alaggia is a certified meditation instructor and practices meditation as a way of finding calm, promoting healing, and fostering resilience. She teaches and conducts research in interpersonal and collective trauma at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. Thank you for being here today, Ramona.

And for folks I haven't met yet, my name is Lauren Brown. I'm the mindfulness meditation and yoga program coordinator for the Division of Student Life, and I'm grateful that you all found your way to our session today. With that, I'll hand things over to you, Ramona.

Dr. Ramona Alaggia:

Well, thank you, and thank you very much for having me here. Hello, welcome. My name is Ramona Alaggia. As Lauren mentioned, I am a teacher at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work here at the University of Toronto. And I hope that I can offer you some insights to meditation as an antidote to stress and through using a trauma-informed lens.

A little bit about me, I've been meditating for the last 15 to 20 years. I started as many people do because of certain life events that have been happening, certain stressors, some health issues. I started with transcendental meditation, then moved on to other methods and forms, and then more recently, have become certified as a Chopra meditation teacher. And what that means is that we believe in using the mantra to move you from that external activity to your internal quiet through the use of a personal mantra, a primordial sound mantra.

I'm a social worker. I've been a social worker for three decades and more recently, out teaching social work in the second half of my career. And I have to say that social work came honestly to me having been raised with a fairly chaotic family. I'm sure this is a familiar story to folks where that kind of chaos

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and turbulence, the mental health issues, the addictions, all sorts of things that were happening were eventually catching up with me.

And it was actually a life event with my mother who was starting to deteriorate that I started to want to explore that further, and meditation became a part of that and one of my vehicles for doing that. And so, these questions that I've listed here on this slide are the four soul questions that in Vedic tradition, if we ask ourselves this each day, we are probably coming up with different answers.

I started with who am I as a social worker, as a daughter? But I could have also been telling you that I am a mother of daughters and a grandmother as well. And every day we inhabit a different role, or in different contexts we talk about who we are and what we desire. And I guess today, if I were to ask that question right now, it would be harmony and some sort of world peace given the times that we're living in. And wouldn't it be great if we could collectively meditate and reach that critical mass to achieve that kind of peace?

My dharma, my purpose in life is to serve others, obviously, being a social worker, but also knowing that I need to serve myself first before I'm able to serve others. And through meditation, I'm able to do that. And sometimes we call that self-care. We develop tools to take care of ourselves so that we are able to do the good in the world that we'd like to. And what I'm grateful for today is really being here with you and having been invited to share these teachings and my learnings with you.

So let's talk about stress. When we hear about stress, we hear all sorts of things that stress can be a good thing. We need a certain amount of stress to motivate ourselves, to keep us going, to keep us safe, to know when we need to retreat and to protect ourselves. But stress does result from receiving obstacles to the fulfillment our needs and desires. And when you think about just this question, what stresses are you experiencing even just today and in the moment, we can probably come up with a list of things.

And the thing that we've learned about stress that is on the more harmful side is that our bodies respond aggressively to perceived obstacles or threats. And we very quickly fall into that flight, fight, freeze response. So there's stress, but then there is toxic stress. And while we can't avoid stress, we should focus on identifying toxic stress. And this is where meditation can help to detoxify and purify the mind, our spiritual life, our feelings.

And I want to talk a little bit more about this fight, flight or freeze response to stress and where that comes from, and that's the prehistoric brain. And that brain that we needed to survive back in those times is still activated. It's still activated when we have normal stresses.

So when I talk about toxic stress, but let's start with everyday stress. I think about how sometimes I'm running off to a meeting and I know my team is going to be there and my boss is going to be there and I'm on the public transit and things don't go well. And the subway stops and you have to get off and you know you're going to be late.

Your stress levels start coming up and you start creating this narrative in your mind that if you're late, that you're going to be judged. That if you're late, your boss may have a negative impression of you, and then that may lead to you losing your job. And before you know it, your mind has just gone racing to

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how am I going to pay the rent and put a roof over my head and feed the kids or clothe myself, or shelter.

And so that's when we know when that response or that preconditioned reaction kicks in so that our bodies start to feel it and it starts residing in our bodies. I don't think I'm telling you anything new, when we know that stress can cause bodily issues. There's a whole list of them here where we have our heart beat faster, our blood pressure rises, where we're sweating or adrenal glands are pumping, and we have this cortisol, that we're flooded with cortisol and our sugar levels are rising and so forth and so on. Before you know it, our immune systems are becoming suppressed.

And that's when we're moving into the toxic stress domain, where we don't need to in modern times and contemporary times have the prehistoric brain functioning at this high alert level, when we can use ways to calm ourselves through meditation so that we don't get into these particular responses that start to affect our bodies as we all know.

So meditation helps us move from chaos to calm, from these responses of fight, flight, and freeze and all the physiological responses to then this restful awareness I refer to at the end of our short meditation, where we can bring all these physiological responses down, that we can feel our heart rate slow down, our blood pressure come down. We breathe more easily, more deeply.

And we are now in contemporary times where we don't have to rely on preconditioned reactions, but rather we become self-aware and we use restful awareness to be able to respond in more controlled ways, in ways that are better for us.

And we know that these physiological responses over time become the seeds of illness leading to heart disease, psychosocial issues, addictions, diabetes, digestive disturbances, even premature aging and at times, to infections, cancers, and cardiovascular issues. So it's through restful awareness and meditation that we can begin to bring these down.

I'm going to move now from talking about stress, toxic stress, and then where does trauma lie in this whole spectrum? We've learned from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study often referred to ACES that a study done in the Kaiser Clinic, a longitudinal study with a very, very large sample that followed people, that adversities in childhood are more common than initially thought, but that these adversities can lead to trauma.

And it doesn't mean that everybody who experiences adversity is going to have trauma, but it does mean that sometimes it results in a traumatic response. We can't avoid adversities, they're going to happen in a lifetime and some of them will be more normative. However, some will be more on the traumatic end of the spectrum.

And these traumatic effects are toxic, as mentioned before, physically, emotionally, and spiritually when we feel stress and toxic stress. But these are even more amplified in trauma when it's stuck in the body. When it's unresolved, it may not be recognized. And that's I think the most important part to having a trauma-informed approach is that many of these traumas will not be disclosed for people or even recognized, and we should assume that there may be trauma, and we should assume that it can happen with folks we are meditating with.

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The study found that there are higher incidences of serious physical life-shortening and life-limiting diseases, serious mental health and addictions issues. And this has created a rationale for generalized trauma-informed approaches.

So what happens when you move from experiencing adversity to trauma? As we know, these are part of life, adversity, and these can be overcome a lot. Most people overcome with coping skills and tools to transverse these. And these can actually lead to growth and resilience building. And I'll spend some time talking about the relationship or resilience to trauma because I don't think you can talk about one without the other. They go hand in hand, if we're doing the work and using meditation as a tool for resilience.

So what happens when trauma is part of a person's experience and if it's unresolved over time? It manifests in certain feelings, behaviors, reactions, some of which are hyper-vigilance and being on high alert all the time. Hyper arousal or hypo arousal, which means overreacting or under reacting. Dysregulated affect or numbness, cutting off of the affect. And a hallmark of trauma are flashbacks. I'm going to talk more about those because they can be triggered by meditation.

So what happens when trauma is part of the picture in meditation? An individual may become extremely emotional in a meditation session with anger, tears, sadness, even hysterical laughing. They can have extremely uncomfortable bodily sensations. They may suddenly freeze and not be able to move at all. They may have to leave the room, and they may experience flashbacks.

Part of the work that I do as a social worker and as a clinician is to see folks in therapy and often they have childhood trauma. That's why they're seeing me in their adult years. And sometimes they come to me because they've tried meditation and have had flashbacks or the occurrence of repressed memories that they didn't know that existed, which can be very distressing.

So what can we do about this? How can we create a space that is trauma-informed that allows for safe meditation, knowing that meditation can be one of the most powerful tools in helping folks with trauma? And so I turn to the work of Harris and Fallot, who coined the term a few decades ago. It's been a while now. And I look at their pillars, the pillars that they offer as foundational to an approach.

You'll see some lists of these that are slightly different for different contexts, but I tend to rely on these principles as the pillars that will create the foundation to be able to do this work. Those are safety, trust, choice and control, collaboration, empowerment, and using a strengths-based approach. If we use these principles in all that we do, then we can reduce re-traumatization.

I've had clients come to me from meditation where they've had such an experience as I described before and say that they never want to go back again. How can we then work so that doesn't become a part of their experience because that is a flight response, it's an avoidance response, and it's a response that perhaps they've used quite frequently to avoid the painful feelings, to avoid the reliving of the trauma. And while we don't want to push them into a fight response, we do want them to feel comfortable in spaces where they can learn tools to help with these particular issues.

I want to talk just a minute about how trauma and stress reside in the body. And we know this, there's a huge mind-body connection, but not only that, there is a huge eco-systemic connection that we are part

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of our environment that we interact with our environment. Just even the notion of breath and how we use breathing to calm ourselves.

When we think about this, we inhale oxygen and we exhale carbon dioxide. Plants do the opposite. The trees around us, the plants around us are doing the opposite in this beautiful mutual dance. And that's why nature is such an important part of meditation, to use nature, to be outside, to be part of this eco-systemic, beautiful synergistic dance. It's so powerful.

The other thing that I know about trauma that I've learned about through the years being in the body is that we often start to have problems in our hips, our hip joints. And when we do yoga, as I'm sure many of you do, as part of your meditation pairing practice, at least in my yoga, we spend a lot of time opening up those hip flexors and working on getting that all flowing.

And I asked one of my yoga teachers once, "Why are we focusing on that?" And she said very quickly, "Oh, trauma resides in the hips." I went, "Really? How do you figure that?" And of course she was also a meditation teacher and she said, "Well, the flight response. Remember the prehistoric brain, the one that goes firing with the amygdala and all the cortisol and we needed that to survive back then? Taking flight comes from your hips. That's what propels us out of dangerous, threatening situations. And so when we feel that in our hips, it's that old prehistoric body also kicking up."

And so it's just fascinating to think of how these taken for granted notions we have. And I thought, "Oh, I'm just going to become more flexible if I do these yoga exercises." But in fact, I'm dealing with my trauma. And some of us have experienced in yoga those feelings of maybe wanting to cry or anger or frustration. So I'm just pointing out that these interconnections between mind and body are very, very powerful.

So getting back to how do we use these principles of trauma-informed approaches to create a safe place for meditators. Well, becoming trauma-informed in meditation, we can use a few techniques. You probably may have noticed that not just myself, but other folks who lead meditations will offer alternatives to closing eyes. For people who've experienced trauma that can be very threatening to totally close one's eyes. We don't know how that played into their trauma back in the past that gets relived when one is asked to close their eyes.

So I suggest focusing on an object with a soft gaze. And something that's not moving. It may be a crystal that somebody has that gives them comfort, I think I have a few here around, to focus on that. And not to move the eyes around, but keeping that soft gaze because we want to keep that external activity down to be able to get into internal stillness.

I've run meditation groups in my clinical practice in the past where trying to do meditation, or individually, is just really beyond the scope of what someone is able to do for a long period of time. So I start for very short periods of time, sometimes just one to two minutes at the beginning of a session to ground, at the beginning of a group meditation just to be able to start building up that ability to tolerate that stillness and calmness.

I have folks who say, "I don't want to be with my thoughts." And I tell them, "I can't stop your thoughts. Do you know the research says you have 60,000 thoughts a day? But I can help you distract you from your thoughts." And that's where the personal mantra and the particular Chopra method that I use

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really comes into play to come back to the breath. I remind them to come back to their breath and to a mantra, if that's what they're using. Guided meditations help as well where visualizations are given so that that anxiety can be contained.

I allow them to be able to stop when they want to because I don't know if I'm going to exceed the ability of them being able to tolerate the length of time that for me or others might be quite fine. It's a way to give them choice and control so that when we look back at those principles, we're building trust. We're building trust by saying, "I'm inviting you but you can tell me if this is not okay for you. I'm giving you alternatives to create safety. So if closing your eyes makes you feel unsafe and anxious, we can do something else." Giving them short periods of times, giving them control, choice.

And I allow them to stop and gently return to the room and then offer a debrief. Collectively, go around the room, "How was that for you?" Or individually if required. I also suggest that you can pass at any time. You don't have to debrief. You don't have to give me feedback on how that was for you. And if you want to, but you can't in this moment, we can do it off to the side. Because that debrief is really important for you as the teacher to understand what that experience has been like for that person who may be dealing with trauma.

So once established that trauma might be activated, we start with focused kinds of meditations. I would also check space for safety. Is this a safe place for them to be meditating? But also, where do they meditate at home or in whatever space? What do they have around them that might help to calm? I suggest that it be one particular space.

I have a particular space. I don't have a particularly big house or anything, but I have a space, a little corner where I have my crystals, where I have my meditation cushion, where I have my special chair. And actually, my brain has now, I just have to look at that space and it starts to put me in that place of safety, and I can go in there and I can do my meditation. I do meditation twice a day now, built up to that over many years. But space has become something that's really important and that's a safe place that folks who've had trauma might appreciate.

I remind them that there are exits, that you're not trapped into this. And it may be that is, simply, as in the beginning I said, "Put your hands on your lap or on your knees, but maybe putting them to your heart or needing to open your eyes if you've already closed them and that's not okay and it starts to feel uncomfortable." So that empowers. So we're using empowerment as well to say, "You have control and choice, but you can empower yourself to do it in the way that is safe for you and feels good and is a resilience tool."

I have folks who say, "I just can't sit and meditate. I have to lie down." And I say, "That's fine. Whatever position is comfortable. We try to use lying down maybe for a sleeping meditation at night. So try not to fall asleep. But that's okay if you do, we'll bring you back." But giving that kind of "you can create your method that is suited to whatever experience has brought you here that's perhaps been traumatic and is evoking those trauma responses".

I also use a personal mantra that in the Chopra method, we use primordial sound meditation that's based on vibrations and the belief that vibrations are very soothing and what you say inside your head can soothe. I also use perhaps humming. Humming is another way to calm the vagus nerve. That vagus

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nerve that runs down, if you do a deep breath in and exhale and hum for as long as you can, it vibrates to soothe the top of that vagus nerve so that it calms.

The power of breath is probably the most powerful tool. It's the first and the last thing we do in this life. Teaching to breathe in from the diaphragm, belly breathing. Teaching breathing out that releases muscles as I mentioned. If you have discomfort in your body, it aids in that letting go. It's that connection to environment that I talked about.

And so with some of my meditators, I do find that before a meditation, we will do controlled breathing or coordinated breathing even before we start. There are methods of breathing. You may know about these. We practice square breathing. I learned this a long time ago in CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy. The in for 4, hold your breath for 4, exhale for 4, hold your breath for 4, and do that four times. That sometimes preceding a meditation helps to be able to tolerate longer periods of meditation.

Another one is the in for 4, and you can change it, it's going to be in for 4, out for 8, in for 6, out for 12, but you want the exhale to be longer than the inhale. And that really aids in that detoxification, the purifying, both in terms of emotions and body. And so that exhale is really releasing a lot of those toxins.

Alternate nostril breathing is another one that I teach folks before they meditate. And even before we start meditation sessions, I might focus on a session or two on simply teaching and practicing breathing and having them practice in between so that we can then start meditating knowing that that tool is there to help settle, to help calm.

I also wanted to mention that, for folks who have experienced trauma, really trying that practice of being present, being in the moment helps with dissociation, if that's part of the trauma response. But it also helps with reminding them that they can't change the past.

We can't change the past and we can't control the future, but we can be in this moment and we can be present, and we can not be a victim to our preconditioned reactions. But rather, we can lift ourselves above and have the self-awareness to then choose how we want to respond.

Because often with trauma survivors, it's that feeling of being out of control, of melting down, of feeling bad afterwards, the remorse, and then reminding them that you have these tools, that you don't have to react, that you can respond. And to practice compassion, self-compassion.

And finally, when we want to work with safety, choice, and control, and to work collaboratively, there are other things that we can do. We can speak with warmth and confidence that creates safety. We can speak in a way that provides openness and choice and never tell participants what to do, but rather invite, which suggests choice. They can feel free to assume a comfortable position as I mentioned.

And speak with any participants that cause you concern in the debrief. They may not be able to come to you. They may not be able to say anything, but you can check in with them as they leave in a very discreet way, "How was that for you? Are you okay?" And don't let anyone leave if you're concerned about them until you speak with them because you may need to offer sources for mental health support. It's important to have those on hand.

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It's sort of a full circle moment when I think about clients with childhood trauma, trauma survivors who would come to see me in more traditional therapy that they would come from an experience with meditation. So somebody there, a meditation teacher was wise enough to be able to say, "You may need some additional supports."

And finally, I just want to end by having us once again put your palms together over your heart. And I'd just like to have you repeat the four intentions for living a happy, healthy, and harmonious life. We can bow our heads and repeat silently after me. Joyful, energetic, body. Loving, compassionate, heart. Reflective, alert, mind. Lightness of being. Namaste.

Now we can come back together in the room and I'll take any questions that you might have.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you, Ramona. And for anybody who would like to pop their camera on, you're welcome to of course come back into the room. If you've got a question, we're a small enough group today, you could probably just jump right on the mic and go ahead and ask.

Lucy:

Can I ask a question?

Lauren Brown:

Certainly, Lucy.

Lucy:

So apologies if I missed this, but when you were putting up the pillars of the trauma-informed approaches, one of them was making it strengths-based, and I wasn't quite sure what you meant by strengths-based.

Dr. Ramona Alaggia:

Oh, okay. That's a really good question, because so often we're focused on problems and deficits and how things go wrong. And people come to meditations, especially if they're trauma survivors, with these ideas that they're not good enough, that they're damaged goods. And these are the words that folks tell me, that they're doing things wrong.

And so any opportunity that you can take to say, "You've taken that step, that's a huge step. The strength that you're showing in facing up to whatever it is that you're dealing with, the courage that you have, these are strengths. And these are also, think of the survival things that you did to get through some of those traumatic experiences."

And you can start to identify those strengths so that they're not feeling less than or deficient or in this narrative of there's something wrong with me. In the trauma-informed approaches that I work with and services that I work with, one of the phrases we use when clients or meditators come to us and say

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something that maybe is off or whatever, and this phrase comes into your head, "Oh, what's wrong with you?" But rather not what's wrong with you? What happened to you?

So again, that's a strengths-based reframe that maybe you're melting down because of what happened to you, not because of this bad person you've been led to believe that you are, that we need to understand that and unpack that. Now, you can't do that in meditation, but you can give certain phrases to bolster their positives, their strengths, and what they bring and what they've done so far to get themselves to where they are. So that's the strengths-based approach.

Lauren Brown:

Thank you, Ramona. Are there any other questions folks might have? I'm scanning through, seeing if any mics are popping on. Yeah, Kelly, wonderful.

Kelly:

Have you found meditation to be helpful for people that are experiencing anxiety?

Dr. Ramona Alaggia:

Yes. And there is a research and evidence to show that meditation can help in anxiety, however, meditation can make people feel anxious. So it's laying down the tracks first so that it's a routine. If you can get folks into a routine and see that meditation is a tool for resilience and that resilience can get them out of those anxiety feedback loops that happen, that they can stop those anxiety feedback loops that I call them by again, this stepping back, becoming self-aware and saying, "Oh, I'm feeling this particular feeling."

Getting them to be aware of their bodies because usually the first signs of anxiety are not in the feelings head part, they're in the body. So that we can start to say, "What are you feeling in your body that might lead you to then having this anxiety?"

I'm flipping a little bit to my clinical practice where we will meditate similarly to what I did today with you, first by bringing them through baby steps to get them there. And one of the things I do teach is that once someone is in an anxiety state, it's very hard to meditate then. It's getting the cues before.

In fact, it can draw a lot of anger. If somebody's in an anxious state and somebody says, "Well, just go and meditate on that." I've seen people just blow up like, "You go meditate on that yourself," is the response. It's a reaction.

So getting to recognize what's happening in the body, because it's usually with the breath, right? It's usually when anxiety occurs, the breathing has started to speed up, but it's not perceptible to the person who is experiencing that. So even starting with those breathing practices that I mentioned that might need to proceed more deeper levels of meditating, getting into that.

So it's a process. Some people just dive into it, they don't have that kind of anxiety. But when you do see that there's a reaction, there are ways to say, "Okay, let's pull back, let's pull this back. Let's process and take smaller steps towards that." So yes. And there is research and I could probably shoot a few articles over to Lauren about how meditation can help with anxiety.

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Lauren Brown:

Thanks, Ramona. Happy to receive any information. Perhaps just building on that, and I'd love your professional thoughts on this, Ramona, but having our MindFIT program is really helping scaffold folks who might be doing that introduction to learning to facilitate mindfulness meditation.

And we are not holding clinical practice meditation groups, but one of the things that could happen are those exact things where you're talking about that fight, flight, or freeze response. And so if we were ever meditating in that environment, an open drop-in public style U of T setting, one of the things that I've noticed is go back to, when a student looks to me like they may be having that anxiety attack or panic attack is starting and the eyes pop open in a meditation, grounding them.

Even if the whole group is still eyes closed, making connection with that person, seeing that that is happening for them, bringing them back to a simpler practice. Going back to a belly breath perhaps, or grounding them in the moment. And then when folks have talked to me about in the throes of one of those experiences, some of those more skillful breath practices that may seem simple on a good day can even escape someone who's in the throes of a panic attack.

So having to have those, like grounding in the five senses is another one that's been very popular over the last few years. But giving somebody who's in that panic or hyper aroused moment something simple to grasp. And then I think that is what you were saying too when you were talking about starting a practice with a simple practice, and really starting to teach the silent meditation on the breath in those very short periods. I thought that really reflected what I've seen as a participant in meditation and then also as a facilitator.

Dr. Ramona Alaggia:

Oh, that's excellent, and I love hearing about that, and making that connection right then and there because this feeling of being trapped is not a good feeling if you're having an anxiety or trauma kind of response.

Another thing is that I ask people if they want to bring something that is like, what are those worry stones? You can get these beautiful stones that you just have beside you. And if you have that moment, you can hold onto that. You can pull on that and you can put that on your lap and you can use it as a way to soothe. So that's another kind of tool that can be used.

But yeah, starting small. And anyhow, this idea of, oh, you have to meditate twice a day for 30 minutes a day at these certain times and everything, it's going to overwhelm and we don't want to overwhelm. We want to unpack that and have them feel a lot better, not feeling pressured to do it.

Lauren Brown:

That's wonderful, Ramona. Yeah, it's the opening the door. Can we open the door to a possible tool here without putting up those barriers? And then as you say, lovely, that strength-based supporting like, "You just showed up. Showing up is a wonderful-"

Dr. Ramona Alaggia:

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Yes.

Lauren Brown:

"... You made the time. You showed up." Again from that, in some of our practices, in that nonclinical way, where we're not necessarily aware of all the things that the student has overcome, we do know that somebody showed up and that in itself is so hard to do.

Dr. Ramona Alaggia:

Yeah, that's the big thing. You took the step to be here. That is courage in itself.

Lauren Brown:

Yeah. Awesome. Well, thank you so, so very much, Ramona. And thank you everyone for being here today. I've popped a little link up. We would love your feedback about our lecture series. Happy to hear anything that helps continue or to build on what we're doing in the MindFIT program.

Ramona, thank you so much for bringing your years of experience and your expertise in this to share with our group today. And I will end the recording and thank you all again for being here. If you've got any questions for myself or Ramona, you can stick around. Otherwise, I'll see you in maybe yoga tomorrow over at Goldring Center. Thanks everyone.

On behalf of MindFIT, the Multi-Faith Center and the Division of Student Life at the University of Toronto, thank you for listening, and hope you join us for more.