

Carol Subino Sullivan: Hi listeners. And welcome to this latest episode of the *Buzz*. Today, we're happy to have with us, Dr. Brandy Simula, professional development specialist in the Office of Faculty Development and Joi Alexander, Director of Health Initiatives, to talk about faculty wellbeing, burnout, and lessons learned from our COVID year. Welcome Brandy and Joi. So let's start off just by talking a little bit more about what it is that you do and how issues of faculty wellbeing are important to your work. Brandy, would you like to start?

Brandy Simula: Sure. Thanks for having us here today. Like Carol said, I'm [Brandy Simula](#). I lead the new [Office for Faculty Professional Development](#), and our office is focused really on what I think of as holistic faculty wellbeing and productivity. And when I think about that work, I think those pieces really go hand in hand, and in fact, things like burnout and well-being are really critical to the work that we do, because if we're not well, then we can't do anything else. And so I think about wellbeing as actually really being foundational to faculty development. Joi, I'll pass it to you.

Joi Alexander: Thanks, Brandy. Thanks for having me. As Carol mentioned, my name's [Joi Alexander](#). So, I serve as the Director of [Health Initiatives](#). What we do is that we focus on health and wellbeing and looking at it from a holistic perspective. Primarily we focus on students, but our secondary audience are faculty and staff because they are a part of the Georgia Tech community. So, we really want to infuse into this culture the importance of health and wellbeing. And what does that mean? And it looks different for everyone, but we want to also understand that there is a direct correlation between productivity and being able to take care of your health and wellbeing. So focusing on it from a prevention lens and making sure that we are taking care of ourselves and putting ourselves first so that we have the longevity to enjoy our work or enjoy being a student and the things that we do in our everyday lives.

Carol: Both of you mentioned productivity as you introduced your work. I think you, you bring up a really interesting idea there, Joi, about thinking about the culture of Georgia Tech, and we can extend that to higher education more broadly, but I'd be interested in going a little bit more into that idea about thinking holistically about productivity and how that connects to what we might be talking about related to wellbeing today.

Joi: Yeah, so I think about my entire career has been in college health at different universities, but yet still focused on health and wellbeing. And one thing about it that I try to really focus and allow individuals to realize is that health and wellbeing sometimes unfortunately takes the back seat to our profession, our careers, our academics are the things that really more are focused on why we are at the institution. So perhaps that for faculty, that is why they are here. So it could be research, it could be teaching. And so being able to really understand that if I am not well, I cannot perform well. And that direct correlation is extremely important because it's a domino effect. When we're not able to take care of ourselves, the way that it impacts and, and connects to other aspects of our lives really is, is important. And so I really try to allow faculty to understand that yes, a part of your job is teaching and research and being able to do the things that you do.

But even though it's not written in your job description, taking care of yourself is not only a duty for you, but also for your students, because if you're not well, then sometimes that can domino and affect your students' wellbeing. Because now it's more of a reactive. If you're not physically well, how can you also be well in other areas because your body is kind of shutting down. And so being able to look at it from what are some strategies that I can utilize to take care of myself without the guilt. I often hear faculty say that they feel guilty for taking care of themselves. So that balance between learning to say no and

saying no in a way of “I'm saying no to someone, but I'm saying yes to myself “is a struggle that a lot of faculty have across the board at institutions because they're so focused on their work.

Rebecca Pope-Ruark: Well, it's the idea of having taken care of yourself in your job ad, right? Because it is crucial. And the Institute has really invested a lot in taking care of student wellbeing in the last couple of years. And, you know, in some ways it was wonderful that those extra mental health, you know, facilities and capabilities on campus were there when COVID started. But we also spend a lot of time really focusing on our students in that kind of emergency move and over the last year and faculty are affected by the same trauma. So I'm wondering maybe if you have seen this kind of impacting faculty wellbeing or how they're, how they're having conversations about that. Brandu, would you want to share what you see in your office.

Brandy: Yeah, we've seen what I think is really fantastic is faculty really taking seriously sort of the responsibility to help shepherd students through sort of this repeated trauma, both of the pandemic year also of higher ed's sort of moment of reckoning with anti-black racism and what that looks like in our specific communities takes a toll because it is emotional labor. It's the, of not only managing our own uncertainty as faculty members, but helping our students manage that. And I think in, in the work that our office does, we've seen that around teaching and the pivot and the multiple pivots and the uncertainty and both the actual work of the teaching, but also of helping students sort of adapt to this moment where we don't know what's happening. And it's an extended period of uncertainty. And also for a lot of faculty who work with graduate students, and post-docs, I've seen faculty who are taking really seriously the sort of notion that they not necessarily are responsible before, but have a role in the economic and financial security of students who are depending on their labs or research group for funding and really trying to prioritize, how can I take care of and support of the graduate students and post-docs who are in my lab or research?

Rebecca: Yeah, I think we're definitely seeing emotional labor come to the forefront for many faculty, you know, and it, women, faculty and faculty of color have dealt with this potentially longer than might be recognized, obviously. So when we see faculty and it might be coming up, as faculty are adapting their courses for the new context, as they are working to be more flexible and what that means for them and their time and their wellbeing as they're working through what their students need for them. And there are extra pressures that come along with that. So what do you think are some ways that faculty can still be there for students, but also be mindful of their own wellbeing as they're doing that?

Joi: Uh, so, you know, I think that's the opportunity for faculty to relate to students, right? I think there's a missing relate-ability piece where there's this power dynamic where students feel that this is my faculty, this is my professor, and they're not real and that they don't deal with things in life. But I think that piece of being able to relate and say, Hey, I understand I'm struggling with this as well. I'm also going through different things would really allow students to understand and be able to resonate with, I'm not alone during this pandemic that a lot of students, but honestly, across the nation, people are suffering from isolation and loneliness. And so that ability to connect on that level to say, “Hey, you're not alone. I'm with you. I understand I'm going through.” I think that's that piece that I feel would help students to, to allow them to understand that faculty are, are, had the same struggles.

And sometimes when you're in it, you don't really understand it because they feel as if, you know, my faculty is against me or making things harder for me or all of these concepts that not saying they could not be true. But I think that there's a period. And I tell people within this pandemic, this is something as someone, I have a background in public health, I teach and I talk about communicable diseases. Um, but

actually living through a pandemic is different than reading about a pandemic. And so giving yourself grace and understanding that even the perfect person that has everything planned, we still weren't prepared. And so sometimes I feel that there's this piece of, you know, having everything prepared, prepared and knowing what the next step is, and it changes every day. And so being able to really allow students to understand that, give them grace, but give yourself grace as well to know that we're in it together is really what I'm trying to build upon this Georgia Tech community to say, Hey, we have more in common than we have in differences.

And so many things have happened during this pandemic, you know, lives have been taken and over 500,000 lives with within COVID. And so I think there's so many pieces where people are suffering from trauma and trying to be present at work is challenging. Um, so being able to really just have that space and be vulnerable and say, Hey, I can understand how can I support you and, and being able to support the student, but also have that support network of their own, that they can really separate and have that space to be vulnerable and to be authentically themselves.

Brandy: Yeah. And I think it's, it's so important. I think often faculty feel sort of fear or anxiety around looking like they don't have it all together, or they're not the sort of expert in the room, but I think actually it's extremely powerful for students. You know, there's sort of a message that many of us are not okay right now. And that, that sort of is okay, but we don't know who's not okay. And I think for students seeing a faculty member say, "Hey, I'm having a really rough time. Hey, I'm going to push back the deadline on the assignment or cancel a weekly quiz or a weekly reading because I need some space. And seeing students being able to see faculty model, this is what it looks like to acknowledge living in the context of a global health pandemic, the continuing taking of black lives, the economic impact that many of us are facing and our families are facing the reality that many of us have lost someone either due to COVID or something else in the pandemic and are processing grieving loved ones to see faculty model. What that looks like I think is extremely powerful for students.

Carol: You're making me think about, um, an idea from this great book called [Teaching Across Cultural Strengths](#) by Alicia Chavez and Diana Longerbeam. And one of the things that they uncovered in their research about faculty that was experienced in teaching students of many different cultural backgrounds, is that there are some cultural backgrounds that really are focused on this kind of an integrated community approach to learning. And that it's an important part of the learning experience to be able to share the stuff that's going on in their lives, not just the things that are happening in the specific classroom, and that sometimes it can feel uncomfortable if faculty come from a different cultural tradition where they're used to compartmentalizing, but some of the things that came out of the research is that students who come from that more integrated background are sharing for the humanity of it. Not necessarily because they want something specific. Although sometimes sharing both in both directions solutions come out kind of naturally. But I think just having that insight sort of takes a little bit of the pressure off that if students are, you know, sharing a little bit about, you know, what their experience of the pandemic has been, it's not necessarily because they want something right there, but it is just an opportunity to listen and connect. Like you're saying as a, from a human perspective that we're all going through it. And from that place, then be able to move forward in a way that is supportive of those experiences.

Rebecca: I do want to narrow in just a little bit on faculty who have care responsibilities, specifically childcare, elder care, and working from home lends itself to different complications and different opportunities, but, but a lot of challenges as well. And we know that from the literature, we know that women faculty often feel like they need to take care of everyone around them. You know, we may not be saying this out loud, but like Brandy said about the faculty members who want to take care of their

graduate students financially and make sure that that's an option. And we know from the research also that the, the additional labor has led to fewer publications and grant applications for women faculty, less time to do the service that they're used to doing, and really just frankly, more stress. So what are some ways that we can support our women faculty in particular?

Joi: Yeah. I mean, I think that that is very true. I think it's across the board, but I think in creating spaces to learn from each other. Right? And so I think that's the piece that I know that there are certain groups. I know that there's like women in engineering groups that have smaller spaces where they can meet and talk about women in IT and in different groups. But I really think that's the importance of building a community because sometimes when you're in it, you feel like you're the only one. And so being able to learn from each other based upon how they're able to adapt could help. And it could also build this community that perhaps sometimes as a woman and perhaps having different responsibilities, you have no place to vent and to be vulnerable because in each space you have to be on. And when you're at work, you have to be on; when you're at home, you have to, you know, take care of your children and take care of your, or take care of someone.

So it's hard for you to be weak when you have to be strong for everyone in that context. And so sometimes having those support groups or support networks where they can have space to say, "Hey, how are you managing? And what are some strategies that you're utilizing?" and perhaps learning from each other, because there is no magical solution for everyone. But I do think that when you build community, it does help for people to not only feel connected with each other, but also to feel that they are valued and appreciated. And sometimes women, as being one, you know, sometimes it's this expectation that I have to do everything and if I don't do it, then it doesn't get done. So I, I think having that, that support network that can help to be able to bounce ideas and strategies to utilize, and in creating those boundaries that maybe they've never had to do before and now doing it is really challenging because they have to say no to things that perhaps they want to say yes, or that they are used to saying yes, but it's also causing them to burn out and not enjoy the things that they used to do.

Um, because they, they don't have that fulfillment anymore because they're pulled in so many different spaces. So I, I just really think that if there's an opportunity to, to build community and to build support, I think especially in similar paths and fields, it would really help for individuals to feel that they're not alone in the struggles that they're doing with.

Brandy: Completely agree. Joy. I think those networks of support and communities that people are forming amongst themselves with folks with similar sort of experiences are really important. I think it's also important to recognize that these are structural problems and that asking the people who are being required to, or sort of by the nature of the pandemic, stepping up to do more, to take care of sort of themselves in that sort of resulting burnout and exhaustion that many people are feeling, can't be the only solution. So what we know is that already women faculty and faculty of color, we're doing more advising, more mentoring and more service work. And that is a pattern that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. And I think structural solutions are also a really important part of this equation. So I'm thinking, for example, of work by my colleagues in sociology, at UMass Amherst, as part of an NSF grant that was looking at interventions into things like unequal service and advising loads and interventions like a department level service dashboard, where there's transparency around how many people are faculty advising, what kinds of service are people engaged in? So that some of the inequities that are hidden can come to the surface, and that lets departments be more transparent and equitable about things like service mentoring and advising loads that we know are one of the primary contributors to burnout among faculty.

Rebecca: Yeah. And I'm glad you mentioned boundaries and within community, and this is saying no, but having those boundaries as well, because I think that for many of us, right, setting a boundary sounds like something that we can't do or that we're not supposed to do. Right? Or what do we put boundaries around. Right? And we can start small with, you know, putting a boundary around when you answer email, for example, that you don't have to be responding to email at 9:00 PM or one in the morning, just because a colleague tends to do that as a need that you have to, that's an easy way to start. And I think that good boundaries are just good self-care. When we think about self-care, I think we often think about the quote unquote, easy stuff that you could get a massage or a pedicure, or, you know, take a, take a day off and go to the ocean or go to the park and relax. Right?

Carol: And just do some exercise, take 20 minutes and do some exercise or, or have certain routines so that, you know, that you need to stop working by six because at 6:30, you've got a zoom call with some friends or something like that.

Rebecca: Yeah, definitely. It can be the large or the small things, but self-care is so much more than those things, right. We, those are the foundational things that we do. We need to sleep, right. We need to eat well, those kinds of things. What are some maybe larger scale boundaries that faculty can set for themselves to take care of themselves, especially when they're working with students and, um, thinking about their self-care as well as caring for their students?

Brandy: Well, let me just say before I share some ideas there, I think it's really useful also to recognize that many of us had at least some self-care strategies pre pandemic that we no longer have access to. And so it's not just remembering to do our things, but in addition to all the, all the other things that we're having to sort of create from scratch is new kinds of self-care. So if we were going to get a massage, if we were going to a yoga class in person or in a group, sort of figuring out what's possible in the pandemic moment is really important, but also additional work and additional time and sort of intellectual energy and figuring out those things. And I just think it's important to recognize that those are important, but also an additional sort of added piece of labor on top of the other pieces.

Um, when I think about strategies for faculty around setting boundaries, I like to talk about setting boundaries as being focused primarily in priorities. So being boundary at setting boundaries or having boundaries, isn't just sort of saying no, and being a Grinch all the time, but it's really about figuring out for myself, what are the most important priorities that I have for a given semester or for a given week, and then using that to lean into, where can I say yes, where do I need to say no, I think one of the things that is most important around setting and holding boundaries is being really clear about your goals and about when you're considering taking on something else, does it align with those goals or not, and sort of having a metric or a rubric that helps you make decisions instead of just sort of on the fly or without a strategy, trying to figure out when to say no when to say yes, what kinds of boundaries are helpful?

Joi: Yeah. I think when it comes to boundaries, this could be the first time that people have ever really thought about the need for boundaries. And I think a part of that comes with this perception that if I set boundaries that I'm not being a team player and I'm not doing my part and I'm not, um, really focused on the end goal and that that's totally false. Right? And so I think it starts one with our own perceptions, perhaps that we have taught ourselves, you have to do more. And if we're not doing more than we're not productive and sometimes less is more. And so I think that's that piece of figuring out where can you set boundaries and also respecting those boundaries because it's one thing to set boundaries, but it's another thing to really align and really follow through. It's kind of like a goal, right?

So say the beginning of the year, everyone has a new year's resolution goal, right? Research has proven after 30 days, most people fall off on those goals, same thing with boundaries. You got to be able to continually support and really align to, to what those boundaries are, perhaps, right? The boundaries and self-care. When you think about self-care, I'm a huge fan of self-care. Um, and, and it doesn't have to be this foreign concept that some people believe it has to be. But one thing that I've learned and I've told people in this pandemic, how they're taking care of themselves, as Brandy mentioned sometimes is not offered or there's fear and anxiety around going in spaces where you perhaps were going to the gym or, you know, going and being around people and all of these things that that was your self-care.

So being able to create a new regimen is sometimes scary, but also needed. And so I think that's that piece that sometimes when things are uncomfortable, it's sometimes causes fear and people to be able to say, Hey, I've never had to create these boundaries, or I've never had to say no to someone or perhaps in this, now I'm a little afraid and I have to feel like I have to have an explanation, but it's not really an explanation. It's more of, this is what I can and cannot do. And being able to figure out in your life, what's a need and what's a want, and what am I, a lot of times we're doing things that we want to do and not what we really need to do. And if we really look down at the core, there's 24 hours in a day and that's fixed time.

So how we're spending our time is really going to be important to make sure that we are eliminating any of those distractions or that we're finding space, that we can do things to take care of ourselves, especially when stress and anxiety is at an all-time high nationally with this pandemic. So perhaps that's, you know, in the morning meditating or finding space before really having to check your emails, which can sometimes be daunting because now you're feeling like you've missed things through the night that now that causes that increased anxiety before even coming to work. So just really looking at your schedule and your regimen and figuring out what are those times and spaces that you can be off, and off sometimes means all from technology. Off from checking your emails all from, you know, being able to feel like you have to be attached to your phone or to your computer.

Brandy: I think it's also important and sort of a bit of the sort of elephant in the room situation to acknowledge that faculty often feel a lot of pressure and anxiety around. I can't say no. Or I can't set boundaries with my chair, with colleagues in my department who will be voting on my tenure or promotion case, uh, contributing to my dossier or evaluating my materials, et cetera. Um, and just to recognize that that feeling is very real, but that doesn't mean that you can never say no or never set a boundary with a colleague or with a chair or your supervisor for academic professional faculty or faculty and other tracks. What I think is really important to think about saying no and setting boundaries is that it's not just what you're communicating, but how you're communicating it. And that you can focus on preserving a relationship or contributing to part of what you're being asked to do.

And that you can, you can acknowledge the importance of that work and share. I can't do the whole entire asset that you've asked, but here's the pieces that I could do, or yes, I could do this, but not on the timeline you've laid out. Here's how I could get it done. So when you think about saying, no, you're not just replying back to letters: N O, period. And that's the end of the email, but you're saying to, when you think about, say no saying no to think about what is the piece that you can say yes to, or you could say, no, I, I really don't have bandwidth to do this right now. Here's a colleague who has more expertise in this area who might be able to help. So you're coming back with trying to help with whatever you're being asked to do, even if you're not taking on the whole entire ask that someone originally approached you with

Carol: When you think about [Brene Brown](#) in [Dare to Lead](#) talks about “clear is kind.” And I know like for myself and a lot of a, of others who are other-focused, it's sometimes hard for me to have those no's, set those boundaries because I'm so focused on how it was the impact on the relationship going to be. But thinking about clarity as actually being the kindest way. And as you were saying, Brandy, to be really specific, here's how I can contribute. Here are some ideas for moving forward in that work, and acknowledging that the work is really important.

Joi: Yes. I also believe, you know, I always tell people if you're saying yes to something, you should also be saying no to something else. Right. I think the challenge is sometimes we say yes to everything and say no to nothing. So if I'm adding on something, what am I choosing to take away? Like I can't add and not take away because then my plate becomes flooded, and now I, my bandwidth is short, right? And so I think there's nothing wrong with saying, “yes, I can do this, but I can no longer do this.” Right? And I think that's that, that compromise in that medium and on, you know, sometimes there's an expectation to perform at a high level. And with, with that expectation, it's hard to do that when you have a lot on your plate and you're able to really do it and maximize it to the best, you know, capability that you can.

Rebecca: There's also the sense that you can say something along the lines of “yes, but I need this level of support,” right? Yes. I need admin support or I need a mentor to help me work through this. Right. So you can say, no, or I can do this, but you can also say, “I can do this, but I need some other things to be able to support that and do it well.”

Joi: Correct. And that's a part of the negotiation, right? I think that's that piece that sometimes there's the misbelief that we can't negotiate, you know, it's like, well, this is what you have to do. This is what you've been doing, but actually it's, it's actually taken an impact on me. Right? And sometimes just because you've been doing it doesn't mean that you've been doing it well, it's just been on your plate and you haven't been able to really have those conversations to be able to figure out what you need perhaps as a mentor, perhaps as training, whatever that, whatever that ask is. I always say go into that conversation, knowing what that is, instead of expecting that person to know what you need to be able to do your job well.

Brandy: And let me just briefly plug here, the [National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#), Georgia Tech has an institutional membership. So, if you're listening and you're Georgia Tech faculty, you can create a free account using your Georgia Tech email. They have a workshop called “The Art of Saying No,” that is specifically around building your skills, developing tools and strategies, helping you figure out when and how to set boundaries and say, no, that I think is really useful if you're thinking yes, I should be able to say no, but I still don't know exactly how, that's a great resource.

Carol: That sounds great. Thank you.

Rebecca: We'll definitely link to that in the show notes. I want to pivot a little bit and go back to what we were talking about a little bit earlier and think about the, the stress that compounds on top of faculty, especially as we're dealing with multiple layers of trauma. And I want to talk a little bit about burnout. So, and a little, little plug Brandy and I are hosting a bi-monthly or twice a month [conversation group for women+ faculty to talk about burnout](#). And we'll link to that in the show notes as well, but it's very easy to say we're burned out, right? I'm burned out. I feel burned out, but there's also a clinical version of that specifically that is kind of a diagnosable, a diagnosable thing. That's, that's important to know. I think so just really briefly, I wanted to share kind of just the definition characteristics, and then we can

talk about maybe how we can help support people, identify those in themselves, as well as in our colleagues, just to support faculty and staff wellbeing more broadly.

So the World Health Organization defines burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that cannot be managed or mitigated easily. So clearly we're all probably in that classification, in that category and that definition, and there are three main characteristics of burnout that we can be on the lookout for in ourselves, in our colleagues and in our students as well. They are experiencing the classroom and academia as, as a workplace really, right. That's kind of where they are. It's, it's kind of their job right now. So we can see it in lots of different ways, but there are three major things to be on the lookout for, for, and the first one is really complete exhaustion, be mental. It might be intellectual. It might be emotional. Brandy talked earlier about not being able to focus on anything. So recognizing that that well is dry.

The second one is the sense of cynicism toward the job or depersonalization. It's when you really start pulling back emotionally and sometimes physically from the context that is causing you that much stress. And that, that can be, that can be problematic in lots of different ways. Especially if you start depersonalizing your students, then not really thinking about them as people and common humanity there.

And then the last one is a lack of feeling of accomplishment, right? You don't, you, you struggle to see the point in what you're doing. Why are we still doing this? Is it worth it? What are we doing? So I think those three, those three characteristics are important to be on the lookout for. And I'm curious if you see those manifesting in ways that could be dramatically impacting teaching and learning specifically. Yeah.

Brandy: I think especially people who are experiencing that feeling of exhaustion and the lack of focus makes it really hard to do what we think of as routine teaching activities, like pull out threads from a discussion into sort of coherent themes, like keep the focus of ideas for a lecture or a class discussion in our minds. And I think, Rebecca, that piece that you identified that I think is one of the most painful aspects of burnout for faculty specifically, is that many faculty come to faculty routes in part because of how much they get out of teaching, out of connecting with students, and when you're experiencing burnout and that piece sort of falls away, not only are folks exhausted, but they're often also feeling like the thing that they loved most about their work is now gone. And that can contribute to feeling even more exhausted because the things that we found most joyful in our work no longer feel joyful at that point.

Joi: I agree. I mean, I think that there has been burnout across the board within this pandemic, just because even though people often companies are working and allowing people to work remotely research has also proven that they're working more than what they were working in the office. Right. And so I think that's a piece of, of being able to really, I often hear faculty suffer from the separation. Like I'm working, I'm a caregiver all in the same space. There, there is no separation for me. So I feel like I have to be on all the time. And so I think that's challenging, especially if you're used to being in an office. And sometimes when you leave your office, now you're home and that's your home space. Now, those spaces are colliding and now it's mixing the lines are blurring the lines.

But I also think that's that piece of being able to really step back and reflect on what is causing the burnout. Is it the hours that you're working? Is it you no longer enjoy the work? There's a number of reasons where burnout can happen. And it really shows up in different spaces. Sometimes when people are burnout, they don't sleep, they don't eat, right? Like they're this, this survival mentality. Um, and so I

think it can go from two extremes, but it's also a way that some people are trying to cope with being burned out. And, and sometimes it's challenging because they don't have space to say that they are burned out. It's this expectation that I have to do this thing because I've always been doing it, but it no longer gives me pleasure or joy. And so I think that's that piece of, of being able to figure out what is the root cause and being able to see is that something that could be changed or negotiated to help. Or that just something that you need to really look at too, to see, are you creating spaces that allow you to take care of yourself, which could help decrease the amount of burnout that you're experiencing.

Carol: Yeah. And all of those things are easier said than done. It's hard to, to move yourself from a place of, of burnout into recovery. And I'm wondering what kinds of resources are available to faculty? We hear a lot about the resources that are available to student at Georgia Tech, but it might not be as prevalent the types of resources that are available to faculty.

Joi: Yeah. I mean, I think for, for me, I think about the resources and what is needed. I think often I think about the [employee assistance program, EAP](#), a lot of faculty don't utilize that right and feel that it doesn't apply to them. And so I think being able to really understand, and as I mentioned, sometimes asking for help is strength more than weakness. And so being able to really step back and say, Hey, I need help. And this is the area that I need help in. Perhaps that's a mentor, perhaps that's someone to kind of help guide them through this transition. It could be a number of, of resources that could be available. I think Brandy and her camp, they do a great job on, on providing opportunities to help faculty. But I think it's one just really letting someone know that you need help is the first step.

And sometimes the hardest, because it's looked at as a source of weakness and not a source of strength. And so I always say it takes a strong person to ask for help, not a weak person. And so really changing that perception that if I'm asking for help, what is available, right? And so knowing what are those resources could perhaps be one of the issues. But another one is I don't want to ask for help because I don't want to be the biggest loser. I don't want to seem as in my team or within my department that I can't hold my weight. And so I think it really just depends on what they're struggling with to determine what they actually need the resource for.

Brandy: And I want to echo what Joi said. I think a lot of faculty don't know that they're eligible for the employee assistance program or that the employee assistance program has support specifically for faculty, which they do. Like we've mentioned Rebecca and I run a twice a month women plus faculty burnout group that's folks who are looking for support around burnout. We share resources and strategies. It's a space sort of just to have a safe, open conversation with other folks who are having these experiences. I'll say, I don't think everyone who shows up for that group identifies as experiencing burnout, but it is a space where folks are talking about things like trying to balance all the different parts of faculty life. If you're interested in preventing burnout and not feeling like I'm in a crisis and I need crisis level support, but I want to think about sort of preventative resources, conversations, et cetera. That's a good space.

My office does one-on-one faculty consultations, where I talk a lot with faculty who are experiencing stress exhaustion, overwhelm, sometimes burnout about in their particular situation, given what an individual faculty member has on their individual plate, what are some strategies that can be useful and sort of moving from sort of general strategies and ideas to okay. Sort of in a practical, concrete way, given what you're facing in this particular moment, what would be helpful? And we strategize that together

Rebecca: They're all wonderful strategies and definitely things to think about as we move forward. It's easy to kind of feel like as a faculty member that you need to be a counselor for your students, or you need to have kind of be trained in ways or are being expected to do emotional labor, passionate labor that, that we don't feel really qualified for. And that can also lead us into burnout. So thinking more about what our responsibilities versus also, what do we need to do to take care of ourselves. And that burnout can be something that people perceive as weakness, people who don't understand or don't know kind of the definitions or what to look for. And that's a cultural issue that we absolutely have to deal with in the future. But as Joi said, asking for help, especially for burnout is, is not a weakness at all.

We know that work, that burnout is a workplace phenomenon. So the culture of a workplace and a culture of higher ed to an extent creates conditions for burnout. So knowing that we're all in those conditions and you add the pandemic and racial injustices and everything that we've been dealing with over the last year to that, and it's very complicated, it's very, um, emotional and difficult to deal with. So being able to ask for that support, whether that's coming in, having a conversation with some folks or it's using the EAP, or, you know, going as far as, as therapy perhaps those things are important to be able to take care of yourself. And if you can't take care of yourself first, you can't take care of the others around you or be, be who you need to be for your students.

Carol: Yeah. I was just gonna say, it's certainly this year has been a challenge on, on so many levels and we, we know that there have been some silver linings or some lessons learned about finding opportunities for wellbeing while doing it all, figuring out how to support students, how to manage that work life balance. And I wonder if, if you might share some of those insights or, or silver linings so that we can, we can take them forward and help us for whatever comes next.

Brandy: Yeah. I'll say the one that I'm really passionate about right now, and it's at the top of my mind, especially as things are seeming like we're starting to turn a corner is it's important to recognize how hard the transitions are. And I think for many of us transitioning back to more in-person opportunities feels like a very positive transition, but the transitions are still hard and it's not like we're just, you know, we went home for two weeks and then came back and everything's the same that this is going to be another significant transition, that in some ways it will happen overnight. In some ways it's going to be an extended process. And I think being intentional about making space for ourselves to go through yet another period of transition, and to recognize that many things we're looking forward to, but some things are going to be challenging coming back to, and that, you know, sort of, I think making space for the human experience of, uh, a mixed experience of the return and not expecting ourselves just to be fully joyful, or if there are pieces that are exciting, but pieces that are hard or like, Hey, suddenly I'm commuting again. Or, you know, I, it was really challenging to be full-time caregiving, but now I really miss seeing my kids, like I was able to do. Those are going to be experiences that many of us are going to be having. And I think making space and holding that emotional space, intellectual space, the time to figure out some of the logistics of returning is going to be a really important piece.

Joi: Absolutely. I think, you know, as Brandy mentioned, the return is a good direction, but for some, they don't feel that. Right. And so I think it's understanding that everyone's not going to be excited and there's going to be a lot of fear and anxiety that people have because they've been away for a year. Right? So it wasn't like, Oh, this is, you know, a week vacation. This was a year. And so now being able to readjust to this new normal, I think there's, there's pieces that, that cause people to have anxiety and to be stressed. And I think because it's a moving target that changes that also causes anxiety because there's not a concrete of what that is. And so for a lot of people, you know, they struggle in gray areas because of the fact of the unknown. And so I always tell people, the advice that I have is to give yourself

grace, and to be kind to yourself, and to know that, you know, you've got to find time to do things to rejuvenate you, because if not, then it's going to be very challenging for you to be able to be present. And that's hard for a lot of people right now because there's so many what ifs that could go one way or could go the other. And so I think just giving yourself grace, being kind and knowing that in the end, it might not work the way that you want it to work, but you've got to one take care of yourself. And if you can't find time to take care of yourself, now it will only hurt you in the end because your body talks to you. The challenging piece is we don't listen. So, you know, stress can be internalized where people's body shut down. And so I think that's a really opportunity for you to be able for individuals to be able to listen to their body and listen and identify what those triggers are and work through them now. And perhaps do therapy, you have access to the EAP program. So have access through a social support network, whatever that is. I think it's individualized based upon the person, the figuring out what that is, is important for you to do now more than later.

Rebecca: Well, thank you so much to both of you for being here today and sharing these important insights. We know they're going to be valuable for our listeners and just thank you for the work that you do on campus for our faculty, for our students. And it was, it was great chatting with you today.

Joi: Yeah. Thank you for having us. Absolutely. And regarding health initiatives, I'll do a plug that all of our [wellbeing weekly series](#), it's open to faculty, staff and students. So each Monday we do mindful meditation from 4-5 Tuesdays, we do a Ted talk and we have a discussion around it. Each Wednesdays, we do trivia around wellness and wellbeing. And what does that mean? Thursday? Our voice message team does that. And Fridays, our dietician does ask a dietician, any question. And so I think that's that piece that sometimes there's a misconception that all of our services are for students, but I specifically have been intentional on making sure that it is open to the entire Georgia Tech community because we are one community and we all need it. And so being that I hope if they are listening, that they will check out our website and register and it's free of charge.

Carol: Those are all great, really great opportunities. Thank you so much for sharing them. I really enjoyed getting to talk to both of you today.

Brandy: Yeah. Thanks for having me.

Carol: Thanks for listening to this episode of the *Teaching and Learning Buzz*. The podcast of the center for teaching and learning at Georgia Tech. Show notes and the transcript are available at ctl.gatech.edu/TLBuzz. Check back regularly for new episodes, bonus clips and more resources on our topics. If you have a topic that you would like us to explore, we'd love to hear from you. You can reach us at ctlhelp@gatech.edu.