# Health and Human Science Matters Season 4, Episode 6: Rachel Lucas-Thompson

Rachel Lucas-Thompson The level of support, being good colleagues, and valuing people as whole human beings is unparalleled. I just feel that is a really unique characteristic of where we live and work and I think it makes work here just amazing. I mean, I feel like we're so lucky to work in an environment where we get supported, truly, to be in amazing researchers and teachers and clinicians, but that is not where the support stops. I feel like I'm so grateful for my colleagues in the department and the college for that approach.

Avery Martin: Welcome to Health and Human Science Matters, a podcast by Colorado State University's College of Health and Human Sciences. I'm your co-host and digital media strategist, Avery Martin.

Matt Hickey: And I'm Matt Hickey, Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies. In our college, we make it our mission to optimize human health and wellbeing through discovery and innovation. Don't just take our word for it, each episode we sit down with people who fulfill that mission, our college faculty and staff. Today we've got a colleague from Human Development and Family Studies, Dr. Rachel Lucas-Thompson. Rachel, welcome.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Thanks for having me.

Matt Hickey: We're delighted you could join us. We know that the life of an academic is keeping many plates spinning, and so we're glad that we could carve out a little bit of time to have you come join us.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Yeah, my pleasure.

Matt Hickey: So we want to start by getting to know a little bit about your current academic work, and we'll circle back to this by the time we close, we'll take a little divergent pathway into family and your educational pathway, etc. But we want to talk about the big problems that you and your team collaborators pursue as a scholar here at CSU.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson So my research, and there've been different foci across the years exactly what I'm really interested in or thinking about at any given time, but the theme across it is really adolescent stress and the effects that stress has on adolescent mental health. So there's some really alarming data over the last decade or so about how much more stressed out teens are than they've ever been before. So for instance, I think 2014, 2015, there was some new data out that for the first time ever, teens were reporting equal or even higher levels of stress than adults. So it always used to be, of course there's a lot going on in adolescence, but adulthood of course was more stressful than adolescents.

So we know so much about the ways that stressful experiences and stress are harmful for adolescents because of the brain changes that are happening, that body changes that are happening, so they're really susceptible to those effects. So these dramatic increases are really scary and probably linked to a lot of the things that are getting national attention, local attention, like Colorado had a huge spike in suicidality in adolescents, and stress is likely one of those big factors.

So I'm really interested in understanding what can we do to help teens who are experiencing stress? How can we empower them to handle those stressors better? Broadly, some of that is really the understanding piece. So just can we understand what's stressful for teens? What are some of those core stressors? So a lot of my research is focused on family relationships as a potential source of stress or support, but then also how can we intervene to directly equip teens with skills to buffer themselves from the effects of stress. I've done a lot more recently on mindfulness-based interventions as a way to equip teens with the skills they need to deal with those stressful things that they're dealing with all the time.

Matt Hickey: There's two common points of discussion that I'm interested in your thoughts about as an expert in this area. One is the influence of social media. I'm always interested in is that a platform for trouble? Is it a platform for good, healthy communities? Is it both and it depends on a whole bunch of other things?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Yeah, I mean, I definitely land on the both. I think where this also connects, some of what we're doing is mindfulness-based interventions we know in general are effective, but there's some room for improvement for strengthening the effects of those interventions. This will connect to your question, feels like I'm going off on a tangent, but one of the ways that they don't do quite as much as they should is really supporting anybody, but teens in particular, from taking what they learn in a group program and actually using it in their daily lives.

So any of us who've done any learning, we've tried a new diet, we've tried a new exercise, it's hard to make those habits. So we've actually argued, this isn't social media specifically but technology more broadly, that we can really harness the influence of technology in adolescents' lives to help them engage in that process that we call skill transfer, taking what they learn in a group program and applying it to their daily lives, especially during stress. Because of course group programs, usually those are not stressful. What we need to do is support teens when they're actually fighting with a friend at school or they've gotten a bad grade on a test and they don't know how to handle it.

So that's part of the reason I land on the both, and we've given a lot of thought to that. We think about our cell phones in particular as mindless. We often use them mindlessly, frankly. We're just scrolling or we're using it to remove ourselves from wherever we are currently, but can we harness that evil for good? Actually, teens are on their phones all the time, can we actually use that as an opportunity to remind them, "Why don't you stay rooted to the current moment. Pay attention to your body and your breath, and can you use some of those mindfulness skills that you've learned? Here's what they are and here's how you might use them right now." So that's part of the reason I land on the both, is that it can do a lot of harm, but maybe we actually can accept the influence that these tools have in our lives now and try and use those to make our interventions more effective.

Matt Hickey: There's a degree of realism there, it seems to me, because they're simply not going to go away. So we can stick our heads in the sand or stomp our feet all we want, but the more prudent approach seems to me to say, okay, how can we leverage that as a constructive tool?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Yeah, leverage it and be aware of, here are the downsides, but how can we try and overcome some of those and use these as helpful strategies instead of just harmful.

Matt Hickey: Well said. My second question is the more recent one, and this is the impact of COVID-19 and lockdowns on adolescent mental health. How has that impacted you in your approach to the questions you asked?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I think really we've had a couple of opportunities to leverage some larger studies that were ongoing to actually directly study the effects of the stress, and of course not the physical effects of COVID-19, and so I feel like have tried to take advantage of those. Luckily, we don't have very many naturally occurring, large scale stressors that we can try and understand the effects of those on teens. But I think really interested in particular in family relationships as a buffer, especially during the initial phases of lockdown, that positive supportive family relationships have the potential to have really buffered some teens. Of course, stressful family relationships then likely exacerbated the effects of lockdown because they were around each other all the time, got a lot of cutoff from social support.

So we've tried to take advantage of some larger, ongoing projects that we had at the time to investigate some of those things. We did find some evidence that high quality relationships, with parents in particular, actually did buffer some of the negative effects of stress on mental health during the early phases of the pandemic. I mean, I think more broadly, I think for all of us, it's forced us to rethink the way we do things more broadly. Maybe not the research, the exact topic of our research, but just the ways that we conduct it and the ways we work together. That's been interesting.

Matt Hickey: It's interesting and you've got my wheels turning, you can probably see by the look on my face. Again, perhaps not an easy question to answer, but I'm interested in your thoughts in terms of lessons learned from COVID. Has it introduced us to new things or is it reinforcing some things we already knew and maybe they're even more important than we thought they were in terms of, again, adolescent mental health?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson That's a great... I mean, I think that one of the things that occurs to me that is more along lines of new things, is that we found some evidence that some of the teens that we are working with in particular through a mentoring program that's hosted here at CSU called Campus Connections, we were doing a larger project with them for the few months before that semester before COVID hit and then continued it once in the first four to six months of the pandemic, and we actually found that they were doing pretty well. This is a really high risk sample of teens. So that was actually some new... I think everybody was appropriately concerned, and there were a lot of ways that adolescent mental health on average took a real hit, but some evidence to suggest that some of the programming that was happening that we were offering here seemed like it might have been really helping in these early stages of global stress, that some of those teens were actually improving in ways that we didn't expect as opposed to showing major detriments to their mental health.

So I think that it was a small sample, it was just here at CSU, but I felt like we took that as a sign of optimism that some of these tools that we're implementing can really help that. I feel like we hope that they do, and we find evidence that they do, but that was really reassuring. Especially I think we first started doing some of those analyses in September of 2020, so we were all really in it and worried we were going to see these teens just doing terribly and said, [inaudible 00:09:46] there are some teens who are weathering this, in part because of their social supports, whether that's family, whether that's something like a mentoring program, whether it's something like a mindfulness-based intervention, that that was a time and continues to be a time that these resources are really needed and seem to actually be helping.

Matt Hickey: I'm interested in your pathway, and this can go as far back as you like, and we may push you a little bit in certain directions, but prior to you starting college, where did you grow up, family influences, etc. What made you pursue the degree that you pursued as an undergraduate? We'll get to grad school in the order of things.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I grew up in Chicago and I was a child of two academics. So my dad has a doctoral degree in Choral Music and is musician.

Matt Hickey: That's fun, cool.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Then my mom was a faculty member in Sociology and Women's Studies, so I was a faculty brat. I think I had the benefit then, especially ending up as a faculty member, seeing pretty early on, I helped grade extra credit quizzes for my mom's students and I thought it was so exciting. Now I'm like, that's a great idea, I need to figure out how to have my almost eight-year-old help with that. But got to visit the University and see them teach classes and meet their students, and I was interested pretty early on in theater, and my dad got me an audition and I was like child number three in a university-level acting opportunity as a young kid. It was a really interesting school to observe, a really diverse student body, and a lot of non-traditional students. So I feel like my first exposure to university life was not your traditional one.

I don't remember when I got interested, I'm a developmental psychologist by training and for a while thought I might be interested in becoming a psychiatrist based on my understanding, I was really interested in the idea of talk therapy. I didn't really understand that wasn't what the psychiatrist did. But so went to college with a double major in Theater and Biology at first, and then realized I didn't actually want to go to med school. I wasn't interested in being a psychiatrist, which I learned more about the prescription element wasn't what I was sure interested in, but so then switched to Psychology. So majored in Theater and Psych.

Matt Hickey: Now, where did you get your undergraduate degree?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Beloit College.

Matt Hickey: Tell us where that's at, for our listeners.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson So it is just over the border of Illinois and Wisconsin, in Wisconsin. Very small liberal arts college, incredibly valuable, I absolutely loved being there. In Chicago, the public schools are very, very large. I went to an elementary school where the year ahead of me, when I was in seventh grade, the eighth grade class had four students. So it was an incredibly small and we were all very close. It meant that we got a lot of really tailored support. Whatever level you were at, they could provide you with that instead of being more rigid, like grade-based.

So I was terrified about the idea of going to a huge high school. I was the big fish in a little pond, I can't be a teeny, tiny fish. So most of the private schools then are religious, my family was not religious growing up, so that was a big culture shock for me. I never felt like then I quite fit in. I found my group and my theater kids, but then I went to an incredibly liberal college that felt like just a breath of fresh air, where I really found my people and had just amazing mentors who we got to know really personally, really small classes, lots of great writing support. It was a really, really valuable undergrad experience.

Matt Hickey: Now, was there a moment or a period of time in your undergrad where the grad school light bulb sort of came on in your head? Was it you or was it a professor? Was it, what does one do after earning a degree, a dual degree?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I don't remember. I think I always knew I would go on to get some sort of... Always knew. Of course, at some time I had to have that realization, but it never felt like a light bulb moment. It just kind of felt like, oh, I'm going to do something. It's just what am I going to do? Both my parents had doctorates, so I think that was part of it, thinking like, well that's-

Matt Hickey: This is what one does.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Yeah, that's what I'll do, I just don't know what direction I'll go in. So I feel like I was thinking about that pretty early on.

Matt Hickey: So you wrap up your undergraduate degree. I have to ask you, by the way, do you have any theater productions that are particularly memorable from your time as an undergrad?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson The Cripple of Inishmaan, we had to learn Irish accents. We had to learn Irish accents, and don't ask me to do one, please. This is not me angling for you to ask me to do one, and I will not, but we had to learn them for the audition and then use them. I started to dream in an Irish accent.

Matt Hickey: No kidding?

Avery Martin: Wow, that's dedication.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson It went away pretty quickly. But we used it, we were rehearsing for hours every day, so that was an interesting experience, it was really fun.

Matt Hickey: I should say so, yeah.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson That was one of my favorites, but it was a great... The classes I feel like were even... It ended up being pretty much a cohort model where we all took Acting 101 our first semester and then took all the same classes for the next four years, so that was as impactful as any of the individual productions.

Matt Hickey: I'll bet, yeah, how cool. So master's degree?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I did a combined master's and PhD. Well, technically my master's was-

Matt Hickey: Not in Wisconsin.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Not in Wisconsin, in Southern California. I walked out my senior year, I had submitted all of my applications across the country to go to grad school, and I had to run to class after I took a shower and I stepped outside and I heard my hair freeze.

Matt Hickey: Oh my goodness.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I said, I think I'm done. I think I'm done with the cold weather for a little bit, I think I'd like a break. So not surprisingly, I ended up in California,

Matt Hickey: Irvine, right?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Southern California, Irvine. Yeah. I did an honor's thesis as an undergrad that connected. I worked doing therapy with kids with autism, doing ABA therapy, and I learned very quickly in that that I was not interested in what we would call abnormal development, or at least we did at the time, and was really interested in more normative developmental issues. So I had been considering doing clinical programs or more research-based programs, I tacked on a little research project that again was connected to that experience as a therapist, but that was really transformative. I was like, I'm really not interested in doing therapy with people who are struggling. I'm interested in understanding some of these normative processes, which of course now I'm studying mental health and I'm studying stress, but I'm sorry, those are quite normative, mental health problems in adolescents, unfortunately.

So that was a turning point for me in terms of whether I wanted to do clinical work or research. Then I took advantage of all the research experiences I could as an undergrad, but small liberal arts college that the faculty were primarily teaching focused though, there weren't a ton of opportunities. I was doing some research I wasn't actually all that interested in, I just wanted some skills. So getting to grad school was really exciting to now I can really do research on what I'm interested in. The model at UCI was similar to our department, where you weren't accepted to work with an individual faculty member, you were accepted to the department, which meant very early on I identified two different mentors and was able to find the Venn diagram overlap of what I was interested in, but pull unique things from the two of them, and then eventually a third person as well.

So I felt like I had support to be a unique, budding scientist very, very early on, which I think has really shaped the way I mentor my students too. There are a lot of places where the idea like you're just kind of a mini version of your mentor for all of grad school, and then maybe once you get to a postdoc, that's when you can start to craft your unique identity. That was really impactful and then had two mentors who were incredibly different from each other in every possible way. Well, their research was about families broadly, but that was also really helpful too, to be like, who do I want to be as a mentor? I'm experiencing these different types of teaching and mentorship, how do I want to be? I'm so grateful for that experience. That was pretty unique, I think.

Matt Hickey: That sounds fantastic, yeah. So questions you started pursuing with a little more rigor as a graduate student?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I started, my undergraduate mentor, who I was absolutely loved, studied attachment security, parent infant attachment security. I was really interested in inner parental romantic relationships, but as a predictor of attachment. So that was what my master's thesis was on, that's where I started. Then have really continued thinking about, for adolescents, that the relationships between their parents are very robust sources of stress or support. So that theme continued, but was interested less in attachment security and more about mental health and then thinking really about stress. So that was kind of post-master's that I was really interested in stress.

Matt Hickey: Interesting. Now, how long were you at Irvine?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I was there five years.

Matt Hickey: Have to ask you, the hair freezing example, how did you find Southern California after growing up in the upper Midwest?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I loved living there in my mid-20s. I highly recommend for anyone who's grown up on the Midwest or East Coast-

Matt Hickey: Give it a shot, right?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Get west. But I very quickly realized that it wasn't a place I'd want to stay. In particular, knew I wanted to have children and I just kept thinking, I was like, this is not a... Now there are going to people who listen who've grown up in California and said, "We did just fine." But I was like, kids need to see that there are four seasons. The world isn't always sunny. I knew I didn't want to stay, but I absolutely loved living there. It was also very expensive, and so that's part of it. I wanted to live in a place where I could eventually own a home and feel a little bit less financially strapped. But it is a gorgeous place to live, to be able to drive and get to the ocean in about 10 minutes was... There were lots of time when I needed a little bit of break from the stress of grad school and go sit on the beach and feel the sand in between your toes.

Matt Hickey: There are some advantages.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson There are a lot of advantages, yeah.

Matt Hickey: So you wrap up your dissertation, what comes next?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I have been interested in teaching throughout. Both my parents were really phenomenal teachers, and as well as other things. Then I had these great teachers when I was an undergrad and really wanted to be a part of a high quality institution that supports undergraduate learning, but also wanted to do research. So I knew when I was finishing grad school that I was like, what I want is a job that's 50/50, where really high quality teaching is valued, but I have an opportunity to do research. So I applied with those types of jobs in mind and ended up getting a faculty position at Macalester College, which is a small liberal arts college in Minnesota, and so was there for three years.

I met my husband at UCI, who was also in the same program. He's a health psychologist. So we finished at the same time and were navigating that, how are we going to... We got married about six months before we finished our PhDs, and so we were on the job market, in fact did phone interviews on our honeymoon, that was how it all overlapped, and managed to both find jobs in the Twin Cities. That job was phenomenal, the students were amazing, the faculty were amazing. It was such a great stepping stone. I had a lot of support to do research and then the teaching with students was just a dream. But I found that to do as much research as I wanted to do, I needed to be working a lot more than I wanted to be working. Especially studying families, nights and weekends were all taken up with... I had great undergraduate research assistants who were amazing, but I needed to be really hands-on, which I was fine with, but it just meant it was a lot.

So my husband was in a... What would you call it? A soft money position. So after a couple of years, he needed to write grants to fund himself and he didn't want to do that in the long term either. So we decided for both of us, it was a good opportunity to try and find tenure track positions that were not soft money and that provided more research support. So we crossed our fingers and toes and put everything out, and CSU was where we ended up. I pinch myself all the time that this is where we ended up, because it's such a great fit for both of us.

Matt Hickey: Yeah, it's a great environment for sure. So you both arrived at CSU, when?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson 2012.

Matt Hickey: 2012, okay.

Avery Martin: So over a decade now.

Matt Hickey: Exactly.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Just over.

Matt Hickey: You blink your eyes, right?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I'm waiting, I'm going to get the little tag on my door. Someone in our college puts the little like, "Congratulations, you've been here 10 years." I haven't got mine quit yet, but it's coming.

Matt Hickey: That's fun.

Avery Martin: That's awesome.

Matt Hickey: For sure. Now, the work you do here has been supported by a variety of different funding agencies, including a Career Development Award from the National Institutes of Health. So talk to us a little bit about who funds me, what am I doing now as an associate professor here at CSU, and do you collaborate with your husband?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson We have collaborated. We've had some foundation funding to support some collaborative work, [inaudible 00:23:52] interested in healthy eating and physical activity, but some developmental questions related to that. So we've collaborated around those with this broader interest and how do we promote health and thinking about family relationships as a way to support or not support health. So we've collaborated, have a lot of great collaborators in the department too. At Macalester College, I was the only developmental psychologist, so there was kind of one psychologist in each of the different areas in social and clinical, which was great, but it's also really wonderful to be in a department with, not that everyone is a developmental psychologist, but everyone really interested in development, interested in families to some extent.

So I have a lot of great collaborators there and it was really when I came, I think even in my job talk here, I identified as my key future direction moving from I was doing a lot of the understanding work, the more observational, just like how is it that families and stress and mental health are related in adolescents, and that I really wanted to transition to more prevention and intervention, which is a real strength of our department. That's another reason it was a great fit. So that's been, since I got here really, the direction I wanted to grow in, which is what that career development award supported really, was a shift from or observational or to intervention. That's what I've spent the last six or so years doing.

Matt Hickey: You have a team, you've already hinted at mentoring, so tell us about your trainees and your team. We always ask sort of a day in the life, understanding of course that there's enough variation that there is no such thing as a typical day.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Typical day.

Matt Hickey: Right, yeah. But talk to us a little bit about your team. Again, feel free to name names and pat Dean's fellows on the back, or whoever you would like. Of course, you've got several F-31s, these are pre-doc fellowships from National Institutes of Health that have been mentored by you. So talk to us about your team.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson So I have a pretty big team, at least for our department of graduate students. So right now I have eight PhD students at different levels.

Matt Hickey: That's a big team.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Mentoring is really one of my very favorite parts of the job and I feel like we have such phenomenal students who bring diverse experiences and interests, and ask great questions, and really enrich and inform the research that we do. It's just an absolutely great group of people. We in our lab meeting yesterday took our annual lab photo and I laughed so hard. It's just a group of people that I also really enjoy being around, so it's just lovely to have a large group that you respect and enjoy my week. Most of us have meetings every other week and I look forward to them, to just sit and catch up and chat with each of the students.

But yes, they also have been very successful, have had a Dean's Fellow who then translated that into NIH funding and is on the job market now and doing very well. Way to go, Reagan Miller. Is just awesome. Have a student who finished last year, Tasha Cider, who also had an F-31 and is doing amazing clinical work, is really devoted to that right now, but is really staying connected in some ways to the research that's happening. I feel like now I have to name everyone, because they're all amazing.

Avery Martin: Go right ahead.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson That would just turn into a laundry list. But really they are, they're all doing and developing really great work, and I think supporting the next generation of scholars is just one of the most exciting things we get to do. I think it can be easy, even when we're doing really applied work, it can be really easy on those darker days to feel like, man, this can be a bit... There are parts of it that are a real grind and like, am what I'm doing really matters? Am I really making a difference? I think most of us want to and I feel like that is a way that I can always stay connected to making some difference. These are people who are going to go on, whether they're doing research, whether they're teaching, whether they're going to be clinicians, they are going to make the world a better place and I'm having some role in supporting that trajectory. That I feel like helps on those days.

Matt Hickey: It's rewarding isn't it?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson It's incredibly rewarding. On those days when recruitment isn't going so well or it was more committee meetings than writing or something, I feel like that's a good reminder.

Matt Hickey: The warp and woof is never quite the same. How about key collaborators? Again, you're welcome to name-drop.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I would say I work most closely with Lauren Shoemaker, who's in our department, who has a track record of publications and funding that is enviable for anyone.

Matt Hickey: Phenomenal, absolutely.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Yes, but also such a generous, wonderful peer mentor. So again, feeling really grateful to have collaborators who I look forward to our meetings, not just to talk about research, but to connect personally. I think this is one of my very favorite things about this department and this college, it feels like we really care about each other as people and not just as cogs in some machine who need to be productive. Yes, we all want to be productive and do amazing work, but we want to be happy, healthy people and connect to each other on a personal level, and it feels like that. I really get that in that collaboration.

Matt Hickey: We're going to come back to that in a few minutes and allow you to expand, but I always like to hear it more than once. So I want you to cast us a vision for the next five to 10 years, in terms of your research program, questions you're pursuing, goals or aspirations. Wouldn't it be cool if, at the end of five or 10 years?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson So the Career Development Award wrapped over the summer. I mean, technically I have a no-cost extension, but we're just wrapping a few things up. So that kind of felt like a chapter closed a little bit over the summer, so it's a good time to be thinking about those next phases. I think I'm just really excited to do more work about intervention and prevention, especially because I started on that later in my trajectory than some of my colleagues who are such amazing prevention and intervention researchers. So I feel like I've just got a lot of room to grow at this stage, which I think is exciting. I think this is a stage of career where we often can feel a bit stagnant, and I get that, but that I feel like I have some energy around making a turn just a few years ago.

So I think really trying to better understanding it, going back to that question like, what can we do to better support? We're doing a lot. We know a lot about ways to support teens to cope with stress and promote their mental health. What can we do as researchers to strengthen the effects of those interventions? In particular, in high moments of stress, how can we help teens in those moments that are crucial for coping and for long-term mental health? How can we better support teens? I feel like that broad question, I think, will really guide the next five to 10 years.

Matt Hickey: Grant proposals that are in review or NOAs that you've received about upcoming funding, anything along those lines to pursue these questions?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson So hopefully later today we'll have finalized and sent an RO1 that's specifically asking some of these questions in college students across the country at four different sites. So whether college students are considered adolescence is a area of debate, but many of them are what we would call emerging adults and many developmental scholars define adolescence is 10 to 25, a pretty broad window. So many, what we'd call traditionally aged college students, their brains have not completely finished developing and have many of the markers of what we would think of as adolescents and an incredibly high risk population in terms of mental health. Anybody, of course, who works on a campus knows about the real challenges that university students have faced, even more so than many other people of the same age who are not enrolled in universities, who of course have separate challenges.

But for mental health, it's a really high risk group, and so using some of these tools, how can we develop some of these tools to better support college and university students in high moments of stress? That's what that grant is about. Man, I'm excited. That would be with collaborators in Denver and in Minnesota, Macalester College included, using some of those, but then also the University of Minnesota. So excited to do some more multi-site work, and the Career Development Award did a lot of development around some of these tools, technological tools to support teens in high moments of stress. I think the next grant applications will really support the testing of it beyond the development.

Matt Hickey: Fantastic.

Avery Martin: So when we think about mindfulness, what does that really mean?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson That's a great question and different people will give you different answers. I think it's actually one of the really interesting... A bunch of my students just went to an inaugural conference in contemplative research and one of them reported back to the group yesterday about it, and that was one of the things we talked about. There was a lot of debate... Not debate. There was a lively conversation at this conference about what exactly does mindfulness mean.

The way we use it in our research is in terms of a characteristic, that it is attention that is focused on the present moment and that's nonjudgmental. So really rooted in what's happening currently without the judgments, the evaluations of this is good or bad, and that really those two prongs are critical. So some focus more on the attentional element, like are you thinking about the now or the past or the future, and some focus more on the kind of compassion acceptance piece of it. But really, all of the emerging evidence suggests that those are both critical parts of mindfulness together.

Matt Hickey: A significant part of that compassion is giving yourself a little grace, right? Instead of the, I should be doing, or I didn't do, or whatever it might be, right?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Yeah, absolutely.

Matt Hickey: It's an important piece of it, for sure. I want to take a moment to talk about life off campus now. We talked about some of your childhood trajectory, and of course before we got in here you were sharing about your two little kids who now find themselves in an environment not unlike yours, because both of their parents are academics. So what is life away from the CSU campus like? What do you do for fun, as a for instance, hobbies, etc?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I would like more hobbies. So my husband has always been really enriched by hobbies. He's an athlete, a triathlete, marathon runner, really, and I envy how much rewarding stuff he gets out of that. I'm like, I don't have enough hobbies. I do like to cross stitch, which that feels like it brings up images of people of many, many decades ago, but snarky cross stitching, in particular, feminist cross-stitching, but I find it very soothing and calming. That's probably the only hobby I have and don't have a lot of time for it with-

Matt Hickey: There are two kids at home, [inaudible 00:35:21].

Rachel Lucas-Thompson There are two kids at home, yes. So I have a two-year-old and an almost eight-year-old. Remember with the older one, this stage in particular being particularly challenging for engaging in hobbies that, that take a lot of time and you really can't do it together as a family, for instance. But try and we get outside, bike a lot. This summer, we decided over spring break of last year that we were going to bike as a family to all of the parks in Fort Collins, which any guesses how many parks, not school parks, but how many city parks there are in Fort Collins? Any guesses?

Avery Martin: More than 40?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Yep, there are more than 40.

Avery Martin: More than 50?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson There are exactly 50. Well, there were at the time, I think there are some that are under construction. So 50 parks, and so we called it All Before Fall, my husband came up with that clever rhyme, but All Before Fall was our goal from March to then mid-August. So we biked to all 50 parks in the city.

Avery Martin: That's a blast.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I made a scrapbook, which I'm not a scrapbooker in general, but this was probably the first scrapbook I've ever made. Made one of the time and my two-year-old, she props it up each day and like to look through and see, who are we there? Look, there was my doll.

Matt Hickey: No kidding, how cool is that?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson It was, absolutely. I mean, we live in a place that has 50 high quality, well-maintained parks all over the city. I feel like doing things like that as a family are pretty cool, and to live in a place where we can do that. We can safely bike, the weather is good enough for it, and we've got these resources. We're trying to come up with something for the next summer that will be of similar type of thing. It's hard to come up with a-

Matt Hickey: How creative.

Avery Martin: Yeah, it's hard to beat that.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson It is hard to beat. I'm like, well, should we do it again? That doesn't even include the school parks, which many are available to anyone when it's not school time. So I'm like, we could just do school parks, but-

Avery Martin: You could definitely do that. What was your favorite out of the 50?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson I think maybe just because of some recency effects, the very last park that we went to was Traverse Park, but it had some things I'd never seen before and it was really great. So my soon to be eight-year-old, turns eight in two weeks, she's asked to have her birthday party there. So that was a big hit for us. There's also Troutman Park.

Avery Martin: Yeah, Troutman's great.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Has a beautiful lake, and not just a lake, the park area is separated from the lake by a couple of stones in some foliage, which feels like a cave and is very exciting for little ones to go back and forth. So that feels like a little magical thing, on top of the actual park. So those are probably my two favorites.

Avery Martin: That's awesome.

Matt Hickey: So we want to talk a little bit about the professional environment in which we find ourselves. Of course, you've already given the plug to the college, but College of Health and Human Sciences, what you like best about being a faculty member in that college?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson The level of support, being good colleagues, and valuing people as whole human beings is unparalleled, I think, at research institutions like this. I say that like I've investigated every institution around us, but certainly have been exposed to many, including where I was undergrad, but other places, or a grad student mainly. I just feel like that is a really unique characteristic of where we live and work and I think it makes work here just amazing. I feel like we're so lucky to work in an environment where we get supported, truly, to be amazing researchers and teachers and clinicians, but that is not where the support stops. So that's why I feel like I'm so grateful for my colleagues in the department and the college for that approach.

Avery Martin: Very well said.

Matt Hickey: Indeed, indeed. So of course, our College is embedded within this broad institutional structure, and Colorado State University, above all things, is a land-grant institution. I think top to bottom, this institution takes that promise, that commitment, mission, very seriously. So what does it mean to Rachel to be a faculty member at a land-grant institution?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson That's an interesting question because I had never heard the words land-grant until I came here. People use that a lot and I feel like there were a couple of times when I did the like, mm-hmm, mm-hmm, and then go home and search and be like, what exactly is a land-grant institution? So it's been a learning process for me. It's been interesting to talk to other people who've done most of their training at land-grant institutions and it feels baked into them. But I feel like for me, that process has led to just this real focus on extension even more than application.

One of the things I liked about my grad program was that it was a very applied program, and so it was really thinking about the implications of our work for people's real lives. But to see that taken to even the next step, and that every one of us is really interested in improving our communities and being part of a university that's committed to that, I think that's where I've landed. I feel like if you asked me to define it, I still don't know that I would have the best textbook definition of it, but that's what it's meant to me in practice and I feel like I've really enjoyed being a part of that.

Avery Martin: Your work defines it.

Matt Hickey: I was just about to say the same thing.

Avery Martin: That's the biggest piece.

Matt Hickey: Absolutely, yeah, and that's the beauty. When things are in sync, your mission, your commitment, your vision for your scholarship is so well-aligned with the institutional one. Adolescent mental health is not a problem that's isolated to little pockets, it's not merely an urban problem by any stretch of the imagination. We have the opportunity in this state to both address urban challenges, but also rules. Minoritized populations, tribal populations where, again, the access to care can be a problem. So yeah, I would second Avery, your work embodies the land-grant mission in really powerful ways. It's neat to see.

Avery Martin: Within that, I have one more question. So what is the one thing that people need to know about your research and how does it impact our communities?

Rachel Lucas-Thompson That's a good-

Avery Martin: It's a big one.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson That's a big question, but a great question. Let's see. So what is one thing? I guess my answer to that question, what occurs to me is thinking it from a mentorship perspective. What might someone want to know who is interested in maybe coming here or working with me? I think that what comes to my mind is ever-evolving, a line of research that is driven by genuine curiosity and hope to help to make a difference, but that that involves constant reflection on what's happening and what's the next step and what can we be doing better and what don't we know yet? I hope that energy carries me across the career.

I hope then, again, I really hope that we can, in the long term, have an impact on communities that matter. Again, thinking about adolescents broadly, so high school students and our community and around the country, but also those older adolescents, college students who are really struggling, and I hope we can really make a difference with it. Again, I hope that my, legacy feels like a big word, but I really hope that making a difference on the next generation of scholars in particular, and teachers and clinicians, is where I've also made a big impact.

Avery Martin: That's great.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson If I'm looking back in 30 years, that's what I hope.

Avery Martin: Yes.

Matt Hickey: Great. Well, thanks a ton for carving some time out of your day to come chat with us. We are appreciative.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Happy to, thanks.

Avery Martin: Yeah, thank you so much.

Rachel Lucas-Thompson Yeah, thanks for having me.

Matt Hickey: Another great interview is in the books. Thank you for listening to this episode of Health and Human Science Matters.

Avery Martin: Stay tuned for the next episode, it's on the way. In the meantime, go listen to our episodes from seasons one, two, and three. If you want to learn more about our CSU College of Health and Human Sciences, go to www.chhs.colostate.edu.