

124: Rethinking Work: The Six P's of Career Wellness

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Welcome to *12 Degrees*. I'm Lindsey Whissel Fenton. Our work shapes so much of who we are, which is why our feelings around our career are so important to our wellness. So how do we build a path that aligns with our passion, purpose, and well-being? To find out, I'm talking with Dr. Jessica Henry, a teaching professor for the College of Education at Penn State. Dr. Jess, as her students call her, is also a licensed mental health counselor. Dr. Jess, welcome to *12 Degrees*.

JESSICA HENRY: It's so nice to be here. Thank you for having me this morning.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I will say that you are here on the recommendation of our very own Deshna Nagar, our co-host. She said she learned a lot from you during her time in your course. So, I'm so excited to have you here.

JESSICA HENRY: I'm so happy to hear that. Sometimes I wonder if students are learning anything, and then afterwards they call me and say, "No, no, no. I truly appreciated the course." I'm so happy to hear that.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I'm curious, what was the course that she took with you?

JESSICA HENRY: So, it's a master's-level career counseling course, and I teach it to graduate-level mental health counseling students. That's one of the focal areas of our program, career counseling and how that actually impacts mental health and mental wellness.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Well, and actually, I would like to start right there with the word *career*, because I think it can be easy to think of "career" as being synonymous with "job." Are they the same thing?

JESSICA HENRY: No, actually they're not. I think you can have a career in that a career can lead to your job or be foundational or supportive of your job, but your career is a little bit more about your personal identity. It can define your identity and can be the encapsulating or umbrella term for what you find to be your interests. I like to use what's the five, well, actually six, P's: your passion, your purpose, your perspective, your power, your privilege, and your positionality. To me, that is what defines our career.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: You talked about the six P's. Can you say more about what these are and how they play into career wellness?

JESSICA HENRY: Yeah. So, most times I've seen people choose a career because it's most popular. I've been working in the academy for ten years, and students would come into the program and say, "I want to be this," but they were choosing that because it was kind of a trend within the program. Everybody was saying, "I want to be a child life specialist." And I would say, "Well, are you sure you want to be a child life specialist?" That's a great profession to go into, that's a great career to aspire to be in. And also, I would ask the question: is that actually what you're passionate about? Because I've also seen people leave careers because they're not

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passionate about them. We've had, recently, the Great Migration, but now people are leaving their jobs because they're just not happy. They aren't doing the thing they feel called or led to do. I actually met someone this weekend, he has a PhD, he's a professor at an institution, and he is going to be all asynchronous because he wants to be a flight attendant. His passion is to travel the world. His passion is to go abroad. And so, I believe these six P's play into your joy, the joy that comes within your career comes from this expressed passion and your purpose. What are you actually supposed to be doing? How can you actually make a change and make a difference in the world? Which is what I hear a lot of our students say. They just say, "I want to help people," as their answer. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "I just want to help people." That may be because their passion is to see other people evolve, or maybe even give back in the way they were given to or poured into. So again, passion is what we truly, really care about, the thing that drives us, the thing that wakes us up in the morning. Our purpose could be to help people, to change lives, to grow things, to build things. Our perspective is how we think, how we can add to whatever field we're in. Our power is how we actually show up in those spaces and give to other people, the things that we can influence. Our privilege is what positions us to be able to do that work. And our positionality is similar, but it's the things about us that help pour into the spaces we want to pour into. So, I don't think the six P's set the foundation for our career, but I do believe that when we are truly well in our career, when we are truly happy, when we truly feel like we are doing the thing we were called to do, those six P's will show up in that space.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I like that framework and it has me thinking about how we often think of choosing a career as a one-time decision. It starts when we're young: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" It's like there's one specific path and you better find the right one. That can generate a lot of anxiety, like, "If I'm going to be in this for the next four or five decades, I better get it right." How can we shift that thinking in ways that reduce anxiety and improve our ability to nurture career wellness?

JESSICA HENRY: Another great question. I tell my students all the time, they really want to get it right in four years. They believe that if you come to college, you start a major, finish, graduate in four years, and you know what you're going to do for the rest of your life. And I say, that is absolutely not true. It takes time to think about what you actually want to do. So I encourage my students to think about a graph. On that graph, you have success, belonging, what you're trying to achieve. There's a little dot, put it there. Then we start drawing the line about how you may make choices in life. It may take you time to get there. There may be things that you do, but all of it is for a purpose. So, the anxiety about getting it right the first time, I didn't land as a teacher the first time. I joke with my students that my dream career is to be a housewife of a famous football player. I haven't achieved that yet. But I think all of it is with purpose. Everything I do is for a reason, and it actually adds to what my value is. Me getting to that point on that graph, what I would call success, I've made it to that place. One of the things I tell students to help them avoid anxiety when it comes to picking careers is to let them know that everything happens for a reason. Everything happens for something. Everything is building you up to help you select the place you're supposed to be in life. Whether you start off as a teacher and those years in the classroom help you learn how to work with students, or maybe one day

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you become a lawyer, it's all for a purpose. Nothing is by accident. You can learn something from all of those spaces. Even the training they get in the master's counseling program is useful. These skills are very useful, to understand people, how the brain works, all of it is useful. So one piece of advice I'd give students is that everything happens for a reason, and don't feel like in four years, or in eight, or in six, you're going to have what you're supposed to be doing for the rest of your life outlined. That may not be the case, but all of it is happening to build you up for that next step.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: A lot of what we've been talking about is geared toward students who are at the beginning of their careers, but I'm curious if any of these principles change for folks who are mid- or late-career — or if it's the same basic practices and principles that nurture career wellness throughout your career lifespan.

JESSICA HENRY: Do I think it's the same or does it differ? I think it depends. That's the gray area no one wants to get stuck on because that's where it gets tough. It may be a fresh start. For some people who are in their career, it may be starting over from that space of, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" For others, it may be more about what fulfills you and what actually gives you motivation to get up in the morning. Maybe that's the same question, just in a different space. There's research on the Great Resignation, people leaving jobs because they want happiness, joy, fulfillment. They want to wake up and be proud of what they do; to have a career their child can look at with pride. So, I think it depends. If you feel like, "I don't want to do this anymore," there may be foundational questions you need to ask yourself: What do I want to be when I grow up? What fulfills me? It may actually be something else. But the biggest piece of advice I can give you is today's a good day. Today's a good day to make a decision that is best for you. Right now, is a good time to make a decision that is best for you.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: I love that idea: "today's a good day." I'm also wondering about folks who are struggling with the reality of not being happy or fulfilled, but also needing to pay bills. What's the balance between finding wellness and the realities that groceries are expensive right now?

JESSICA HENRY: Well, my mother and my grandparents gave me the greatest advice: you never quit one job without having another one lined up. Just because you're still working and paying bills doesn't mean you can't explore a career that is more satisfying, that gives you more peace, that helps you be well. You can do both. Just because you're on the job market doesn't mean you have to quit your job. Sometimes our passion can be external from our actual bill-paying job, because a career and a job are two different things. I have a really good friend who's an occupational therapist during the day and a lyricist by night. She hangs from the ceiling on silks and hula hoops, that's what brings her joy. It doesn't make a ton of money, but it gives her peace. She's always wanted to be in the circus. She's aware she has to pay her bills, too. So, my advice is: you never quit one job without having another one lined up. You never quit the thing that helps you stay financially stable. You can think about streams of income. Can you do other things? I had a friend who was a dean in California. She left her job but wasn't without — she drove for Uber, did Uber Eats, because her wellness and peace of mind were more

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important than money. And I do understand there are different components to that, not everyone can just say “I don’t want to work here anymore,” but there are ways you can think through how to reach your aspirations and still pay your bills. I actually have a friend, if you’re interested, her Instagram page is *hercareerdoctor*. She’s a career counselor who left her faculty position to go full-time with her business. I recommend following her for tips on making career decisions that are right for you, that can sustain you, help you be well, and help you prosper.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: Dr. Jess, this has been such a great conversation with so many takeaways and insights that we can all hopefully apply to start nurturing our career wellness. Thank you so much for this conversation.

JESSICA HENRY: Thank you. I hope you have a good day.

LINDSEY WHISSEL FENTON: That was Dr. Jessica Henry, a teaching professor for the College of Education at Penn State. I’m Lindsey Whissel Fenton, and that’s it for this episode of *12 Degrees*. *12 Degrees* is produced by WPSU in collaboration with the Penn State Ross and Carol Nese College of Nursing. This podcast is intended for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or qualified healthcare provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or mental health condition. If you are in crisis, help is available 24/7 in the U.S. by calling or texting the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. More information is available at 988lifeline.org.

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