

# LiveWell Interview, Dr. Brenda Bursch

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## SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Dr. Brenda Bursch

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### Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:02

Hello to our wonderful listeners. Welcome back to The Live Well podcast. It's me your host, Dr. Wendy Slusser. As we enter a new school year and a new season, I've been doing a lot of reflecting on my goals and my routines as both a leader and a learner. And it reminded me of the wisdom shared with me by my colleague, Dr. Brenda Bursch, two years ago about how establishing routines and checkpoints can give us a chance to invite more meaning and joy into our own lives and those around us. The conversation has stayed with me, and I want to share it with you all again. Dr. Bursch is a social and medical psychologist at UCLA and an expert in mental wellness and resilience for health care workers and children. In this episode, she gives us a toolkit to settle mindfully back into the workplace or back into school year. We discuss actionable steps, prioritize self care, set boundaries, and strategize habits to liven up our day to day lives, like putting plants in the office, or even updating your wardrobe. It may even help you create space for yourself to reflect on the past and begin setting routines in place for yourself as we enter this new season. This is only one part of a three part series. So definitely go and explore the other parts on episode 36 through 38 on the Lindwall podcast, where we discuss other important topics like navigating grief transitions and change. Hello there, Dr. Brenda Bursch. So great to have you back at the UCLA LiveWell podcast, to talk about how we can return to the workplace while actually improving our well being. You've identified three themes with our return to work place, remember, recover and renew. And we started off this series with an episode diving into the first theme, remember, and then discuss the second theme recover. Today, we'll be discussing the third and final theme renew. So getting right into it. What do you mean by renew?

### Dr. Brenda Bursch 02:09

Thank you so much for having me back. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about these topics with everybody. So renew, right, the third of ours is really in my mind focused on developing an action plan, we've reflected on everything you've gone through the different areas that we know really contribute to well being and give you the best opportunity to flourish. And so now it's really time to start the planning, it's really thinking about, okay, how am I going to make my way back to the workplace. And it includes both thinking about not just skills that you're going

to, you know, use as you're doing that, but others things that you need to plan for. And so I think that, you know, when you think about renew, you can think about it at different levels. So you can think about it at your own personal level, you can think about it at your family system level, you can think about it at your workgroup level, and then you can think about it at the organizational level. And there's other levels above that, but you probably don't have much control over things like politics, so at level, so keep them at those levels. And so really thinking about each of those levels, and what you need to do to prepare yourself and what you can do to put yourself in the right headspace so that you are in a position to experience as much wellbeing as possible is really the goal of this particular section in this podcast. So to start off, I just want to quickly spend a tiny bit of time talking about self care. More broadly, I think that a lot of people have maybe heard other podcasts or talks or read things over the last year and a half. So some of this might be a little bit of a review. But just to put it back on your radar. We all know the importance of healthy routines. When you think of routines. The reason that having routines is helpful is because it trains our body. If we do the same thing the same way each time, we actually alert our body that we're going you know, they know what our body knows what's next. So for example, if we have a nighttime routine before we go to sleep, and we follow the same routine every night, then our body starts to relax sooner when it knows we're starting that routine because it's been conditioned to do that. If you're really haphazard all over the place, and it's different every single day, then your body never never knows when you're going to bed and they can't start that ramp down process. The other thing about routines is that they help us stay on track as we did the same thing. You know, every day, when it comes to health, we're less likely to forget to do it. So that's another reason we all know about them for As of having routines related to exercise or diet, sleep, many people incorporate mindfulness practices or spiritual practices, gratitude exercises, those types of things, to have opportunity to really reflect and appreciate on some things in our lives so that we can balance out some of the more challenging moments with being aware of the things that bring us joy and meaning. And then we also know the importance of sharing our stories and processing through difficult times with others so that we can increase our own awareness and get important feedback from those people and better integrate our emotions with our memories by engaging in those practices or by keeping a journal. We know that having rules for ourselves or personal policies for ourselves that we implement in terms of boundaries, and schedules, and things like that can be really good for our well being too. And those are really difficult, especially if you're among people who have different boundaries, or different schedules that requires you to really think about how am I going to communicate to others, what my boundaries are, what my personal policies are, and we'll talk about that more in a minute. And then coping skills, everybody's heard the term coping skills, and there's all sorts of coping skills that we know have been very well researched, that we know help people be more resilient. We know that setting inspirational goals, can help us through difficult times, because there's meaning attached to what we're doing, if what we're doing is helping us reach our goals. We know there's a variety of ways that we can regulate our emotions, so that we're not just reactive to the things that happen. But we can be thoughtful about how to react when our emotions are triggered. And some of those have to do with what we pay attention to and what we tell ourselves cognitively, there's all sorts of different techniques that can be used their deep breathing, just to regulate our bodies sometimes can help with their emotional control, sometimes distraction, taking a break, so that we have an opportunity to calm down before we address the problem can be helpful. We know communication skills are enormously helpful. And we all interact with each other. And especially when we're interacting with somebody who's distressed, we feel distressed. And so knowing how to best help in that situation without absorbing all of that yourself, is a very important skill for resilience, and then connecting to positive others and making sure that we have people that we can go to when we need support. You know, these are all things that we know, when you think about it. In terms of preparing to

work, there are things you can think about for yourself, and things you can think about for those that might refer it to you. And this applies if you're a student, and you're coming back to school, if you're a faculty of your staff doesn't really matter, all of the same things can be applied to your domain. And so the first one is just thinking about, what have you really appreciated? And have you been doing over the last year and help that has been good for your health? Are there things that you're doing now that you weren't doing before you started to work remotely that you can continue to do that you want to keep doing because you found that they are helpful for you? Can you make them a priority? Can you figure out how to fit them into your schedule? You know, speaking of schedules, the next thing that many of us have to figure out is how to do the schedule changes that are needed now that you're gonna have to be commuting, maybe or taking public transportation, or doing childcare, so many different things that could impact your schedule. I know that for me personally, because I've spent so much of my time now remote, that is packed more into my schedule, because I haven't been having to commute. So if I'm having to drive around, I have about four different locations that I regularly work at. I have to start cutting things out of my schedule so that I can be live and have time for transportation have time between meetings, those types of things. Some people might have to go back to a previous sleep schedule that you've had. We all know how hard that is just when we have one hour sleep difference for time change. If you are more off of your sleep schedule than that, then you might want to start transitioning now. So it's easier later. My favorite thought about going back to work is what would make me excited. Is the workspace I have is my study space I have are the spaces that I'm going to be spending my time in. Do I like them? Is there anything that I have control over that I can do to make them more pleasurable or to change them. There's a little bit of research for example, that shows having plants in the office can decrease your stress level and increase productivity. Not all of us can put plants where we work but if you can, that's something to think about as an example. I like the idea of upgrading my wardrobe. You know I haven't worn certain things for a year and a half and I don't even want to wear them again. If you feel that way then you might get excited about the idea of doing a little upgrade or have you gained or lost weight. You know you may I need to do that, you know, that might be pleasurable for you. And if so then any little thing that gets you a little excited about coming back, you want to really try to take advantage of, you know, many people might be fearful. And that's a legitimate way to feel, you know, there's a lot of effort being placed into ensuring that everybody will be safe. But everybody has different levels of risk tolerance, and everybody has different practices they engage in, related to what they do to keep safe. And if you're around somebody that doesn't have those same strategies you do, or same level of comfort that you do them, you know, there's going to be differences there. And that can be hard to negotiate. And so it's helpful to think about that ahead of time, you know, what safety protocols will help you feel safe? How are you going to communicate those to other people? Do you need to like put a sign up in your work area?



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Do you need to practice explaining to others what your boundaries are? You know, those are all things that you can do now, that will help you when you transition back. Just like in the beginning of the pandemic, you're going to want to think about where am I gonna get my information from? It could be COVID information, it could be work related information. If you have kids, information related to school, it could be all sorts of different types. If you are somebody who's kind of ambivalent about coming back, or not very excited about coming back, it might be harder for you, you might have to think really dredge up, like, what are the advantages? What do you miss? Anything you miss? Is there anything that you can interject into the setting that would help you be more excited for the things that you're grateful for?

Some people lost their jobs? are you grateful that you've had the job, some people don't have the opportunity to go back to school? are you grateful that you can go back to school, see if you can figure out what those things are that you're grateful for, you know, some things will be better, some things might not be as good as you remembered them. And allowing for that just kind of being open to that change is really stressful and difficult. And, you know, when we had it all go on lockdown before it all happened very quickly and all at one time, and we're in it together, and we had a common purpose. And now it's going to be all staggered. And so it's going to be less united. And that's going to be a little bit of a challenge. So when you have those moments where you just feel anxious or stressed, just taking some deep breaths, and letting those waves pass can be the most effective thing to do. And if you find that those are coming too much, and they're just really interfering with your ability to feel well being to concentrate on to your work, to be functional, then reach out and tell somebody, you are not alone, many people have been struggling, many people have been. And so reach out to somebody, and you know, find out what kind of assistance is available to you. If you're somebody who is a supervisor, and you're thinking about people who are looking up to you, or maybe you're not even a supervisor, but maybe you're you know, a team captain or a club captain, or in any leadership role of any type. And you're thinking about trying to help those in your group transition but, the thing you really want to think about for those folks, this how to communicate as much as possible, and really understand what people are going through realizing that people are going to be very stressed, they're going to see things differently, you're going to have to have a lot of diplomacy in your toolbox. And you're really going to want to look for opportunities to give positive reinforcement, positive feedback, highlight milestones, highlight the good things that are going on the meaningful things that are going on the moments of joy, what you appreciate about each other, to make sure you're a lot more verbal about those, and to try to stay out of the kind of complaining loop that we can sometimes get in. I think the other thing for those who are leaders, that can be more important than all of the other things I've said, is to be honest and vulnerable. Share, you know that it's not been easy for you either, if that's the truth, and share what's helped you share when you don't know the answers, that communicates to other people, that they're not alone, and that you will be likely to understand and have empathy, if they share their struggles with you. You'll be more approachable as a leader, if you can also be vulnerable and share your emotional experience. So I think that that's the biggest take home for people who are in leadership positions. And if you think about the people in your groups from a leadership perspective, making sure they also understand what resources are available to them. You know, there's a lot of resources on our campus UCLA has really focused on at every level of trying to be responsive and trying to think about what the needs that people in all sorts of jobs and our students have and address. in them. And as we're not doing it, you know, there's a great deal of interest in hearing about it to see if there are things that can be done. And then the last thing I really want to highlight, if you're a leader, you also want to be monitoring those people in your group to see, you know, if they seem like themselves, and if you're finding that suddenly someone's quieter than usual or more irritable than usual, are not showing up to meetings on time when they normally would, or, you know, other behaviors that, that you're just not used to seeing out of them, that you don't just keep it to yourself that you check in with them. You don't see yourself, how are you feeling? I've got a few minutes want to chat about it? Is it okay, if I check in with you, again, those are all really appreciated. You know, even if someone doesn't want to chat with you, even if you know, it's something that they want to manage on their own. Usually, most people appreciate the fact that someone checked in on them. And sometimes people don't even realize that they're stressed out until somebody else says something. So you can raise their awareness by saying something like that. So I think that, that is kind of a big, long checklist of a lot of things that you can do. But the idea behind it is, is if you review all of these and develop a toolkit for yourself, a wellness plan for yourself. And for those that you might be a leader of,

then you have opportunity not only to transition back to the setting, to UCLA settings, in a you know healthy manner with a sense of well being. But maybe you'll only be in, you know, maybe you'll really thrive maybe you'll find a sense of purpose and joy that you didn't have before maybe you'll be more appreciative after everything we've been through so that the little things will spark greater joy and Glee than they even did before. And maybe we will be a kinder and more appreciative set of individuals, because we've taken this time to really make such plans. That's, you know, that's a lofty goal. But

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 17:01

that's really you know, what positive psychology is about right is really going for that. Because if you don't go with that plan, then we're not going to make it doesn't mean there's not going to be problems, it doesn't mean that we're not going to have setbacks, it doesn't mean that we're not going to have feelings of grief, or sorrow, or trauma, or any of those things. But it really is setting us up so that when those do happen, we're in a position to be more resilient, and we're in a better position to really derive meaning from them, and to be able to use those difficult times to propel ourselves to the next level of what we find meaningful in our lives. Well, what you've just covered, it's been a tremendous roadmap for many of us. And I'm just feeling this was under the theme of renew, which really, we could all start practicing now, in whatever workplace we're working, whether we're on site as we speak, or on our way, or do flex work, or even are the group that ends up staying at home. Because so much of that it's just so basic in terms of self care, like routine. I know when I tried to teach routines for parents, it takes them weeks and months to really capture the ability to really manage that for their children. So sometimes that's hard even for ourselves to have our own routines, right? What kind of practical tips would you give people to start with when building routines? You talked about their sleep routine, but just in general,



18:37

what would you recommend, you know, a couple of things that pop into my mind when I think about routines, you know, sometimes we need reminders. So if you are trying to establish routines, and you get sidetracked into other activities, you might need to set reminders on your phone, so that you stop, you might need to put things in your schedule so that you have, you know, a stop to remind you to do other things. The other thing about routines and other routine hacks, so to speak, is pairing right. So, you know, we're often talking with our patients about medication adherence. And so you know, taking your medication right when you do something else and putting the pills right near something that you already have as a routine. So you're just start adding to a routine that already exists, is often effective. The other thing is trying to get your whole family on the same routine, right? Much more difficult when you're the only one in the family trying to change routines. But if you can get buy in from everybody, and then reward yourself when you make progress and realize you might not be able to achieve everything you want to do you know going for an hour and a half walk every day might be too lofty of a goal. Some people could do something like that and others can't. If the whole family goes and increases your chances. If it's a half an hour walk then maybe that increases your chances, but trying to kind of be flexible enough so that you can really settle on something that you can make into a reliable routine. In accepting, sometimes we give up. If we have early frustrations, you mentioned that sometimes it takes months, and not that familiar with the research. But there's some research that says something like, if you do it the same thing, 30

days in a row, that there's an increased chance that you'll keep doing it. So you know, the more you do something, the more likely you are to do it. And that we know is true. So I think those are some routine hacks that you can consider. That's great. That's good to set a goal. So 30 days could be a really good goal for



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many people, too. Right?



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So then that helps us less overwhelming, right? Right, like, Okay, I'll walk for half an hour a day for 30 days, then I'll reevaluate



Dr. Wendy Slusser 20:45

Exactly. The other things that you highlighted that I thought were really strong wisdoms to practice, not just in workplace, but at home are things like communication, like your ability to share your feelings, like as a supervisor, can help people feel more comfortable about how they might be feeling. Can you elaborate on that in terms of what instances or stories can you tell us about where you've seen that work? Well,



21:14

you know, it's interesting. That's something that I've really personally worked on over the course of this pandemic. Because I think, you know, as a health provider, I have always been trained, especially as a mental health provider, to not really talk about myself very much right to be very focused on our patients. And then I'm also a professor, so I'm very focused on my students. And, you know, what happens is that by doing that, we accidentally contribute to this inaccurate view that we are in all our accomplishments really impervious to stress, and that we don't struggle. And that makes us impossibly difficult to relate to get out and really contributes to our students and our patients and others, to feel like, oh, they have such a long way to go to be as perfect as we are. And so to transition into being more open about myself, I felt like I was being unprofessional, it felt like I was off task, that I was being indulgent, that I was being, you know, kind of self centered. So it's been difficult for me to share, you know, when I had a friend who died of COVID, and I was so grateful, I had recently seen him, he lived out of state, but he'd recovered. And then two months later died. And so I thought that he'd recovered, like, it was so unexpected, and, you know, so I had emotions about that. And it's not something necessarily I would normally share with my students. But we were all in it together. And I knew it was going to be helpful. And we started having check ins, which we didn't do in the same way before the pandemics. And it gave me the space and the time to talk about these things that we don't normally talk about, because we're always going so fast. And we're always so focused on work. And so I was able to share that and, and then that meant that my trainees felt more comfortable talking to me about what was going on in their families, and who they were worried about, and their friends. And then that leads to the next conversation about no differences in the families, about safety practices. And also, you know, one thing leads to

another. And not only did that help us feel better connected, but because it's specific, it really allowed for much stronger support. And you know, if I think back on the trainees that I had, that were on my service, that first rotation in the first four months of our pandemics, you know, I'll forever be so connected to them because of that. And so it's this long lasting benefit to me, as well as to the people that I supervise, who felt a lot more comfortable sharing with me once I shared. One of the topics that I've been talking about recently, is impostor syndrome. And so we all remember being a student or transitioning to our jobs and having imposter syndrome. But a lot of our students and a lot of our younger faculty and staff don't realize is that that does not go away. There's always new topics to have impostor syndrome about right. And that we all have to ask for help. We all reach out, you know, you and I have reached out to each other when you know, we've had a question or a dilemma or a challenge and we knew that each other would be helpful in that regard. You know, we all have networks that we rely upon to those types of things. And so recognizing that communicating across workgroups into those you supervise to your supervisors, across every which direction can only bring us closer together and prove the work we do, because we're being clear about what's happening, how we're feeling, what we want, what our limits are all of those things.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 25:08

I mean, what you just said about your students and how you have a bond, just from that experience early on, is going to be so valuable for them as they move forward to because they've just been modeled by their professor. And it's going to have that ripple effect. That's one of the fortunate aspects of being a professor at UCLA, we have generations of students out there that really are products of how they're being taught, currently. So exactly how they were taught in the past, rather, and I have, you know, I



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have no plans, I'm reverting back to my old practices, right? I think this is the new normal, we check in on each other now, in a more frequent manner, at a deeper level, as well. And it's not just checking in about work, you know, it's checking in about us as human beings. Well, it

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 26:00

really gets to your last podcast point about creating a workplace or a learning place that is respectful and has the capacity for people to feel heard, and also, potentially, ultimately experienced joy, so and meaning. Well, Dr. Bursch, once again, thank you so much, not only for sharing so much important information about how we can renew at this stage, but also how we can all be models for others in our ability to share some of the feelings that we might be experiencing as well. So thanks so much, and for all you do for UCLA, and also the world.



26:46

Thank you for everything you do for UCLA and for the world. I am very appreciative of you and for you offering this platform to me to share with others some of the tidbits that I've been collecting over the last year and a half. As I've been on the COVID, mental wellness taskforce

for UCLA and giving these talks all over the place, the best part of that has been, I've had to repeat it over and over. So it's a reminder to myself. And as a result of that I've gotten to hear all of these great ideas from others. And those have been incorporated into all of these talks. So it's really been not just me, but a collective effort. And I appreciate the opportunity to share some of that. Thank you. Your response and recognition of others is just one of the many ways of your ability to be so generous to us. So thank you.

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#### Dr. Wendy Slusser 27:41

This conversation only scratches the surface on the wisdoms of Dr. Versus research and experience. I hope you get a chance to listen to the other episodes that she did for us two years ago. They start at number 36. They might spur conversation, inspiration, new self care rituals or just reinforced the ones you do already. So please also comment or DM us on Instagram and share with us how you're integrating self care into this new school year, or at least the upcoming fall season. We'd love to know we've got some really exciting surprise guests in the next few weeks, so stay tuned. To learn more about today's guest, and to explore the entire podcast archive, visit our [website@healthy.ucla.edu](mailto:website@healthy.ucla.edu) and find the podcast page under the media tab. If you enjoy this episode, the best way to support the show is to subscribe on Spotify and Apple podcasts. And if you can leave a review or share on social media even better. If you have any guests suggestions, visit our website for the submission form or email us [live\\_well@ucla.edu](mailto:live_well@ucla.edu) or direct message us on Instagram at healthy UCLA. Visit the show notes on our website or on whatever platform you're currently listening to and check out organizations ideas, or people mentioned in this episode. Thanks for being on this journey with us. This episode has been brought to you by the Semel healthy campus initiative Center at UCLA