

- You're listening to "HR Mixtape." Your podcast, with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel well, like work. Now your host, Shari Simpson.

- Joining me today is Inseus founder Ashley Nelson. At Inseus, she and her team are dedicated to transforming lives through evidence-based mindfulness, emotional intelligence and leadership development programs, consulting and speaking engagements grounded in science and practice. Ashley is passionate about unlocking the full potential of individuals and organizations by helping people become a more resilient, effective, content version of themselves. Drawing upon her experience as a mindfulness practitioner, Fortune 500 senior level executive, entrepreneur, mother and partner, she empowers people to thrive and elevate performance through practice that improves communication, awareness, empathy, compassionate leadership, collaboration and resilience. Ashley, thanks for jumping on the podcast with me today.

- Shari, it is my pleasure. Thanks for reaching out and I'm honored to be here.

- So you have such a cool background and I really just wanted to talk to you because mental health is such an important topic right now and in, you know, I feel like if you're in the HR space, you're like, yep, uh-huh, we get it, Shari, like why continue talking about this? And I think it's because the pandemic has completely changed how we talk about mental health. You know, pre pandemic, I felt like it was more of a checkbox. And I feel like now we're actually getting into those really robust conversations around mental health and resiliency and some of the things that we need to you know, focus on as employers and employees. So I thought maybe we could start with you sharing a little bit about, you know what does the mental health landscape look like right now?

- Well, it's challenging. There have been a number of institutions or foundations doing some research and I can just share some data and stats around that with you. The Kaiser Family Foundation and CNN jointly surveyed several thousand people in the United States in 2022 and published that 90% of US adults that they interviewed say that the United States is experiencing a mental health crisis. And certainly we know that COVID-19 exacerbated some social stressors and people used various coping mechanisms to get through that, whether it's alcoholism, drug use, opioids. You know, we saw of course heightened stress and open discussion around racism in our country, violence. And you know, there's just a deep, deep dependence that has been exacerbated through COVID on technology as well. That really doesn't help. So this data from the Kaiser Family Foundation and CNN also articulated that half of adults in the poll say that they themselves have had a severe mental health crisis either themselves or in their

family. Half. And one in five US adults report that their own mental health is either fair or poor. And if you look at certain demographics, young adults aged 18 to 29, that increases to one in three. So when you think about that, yeah as the population that's entering the workforce or is in certain positions in the workforce, ages 18 to 29, one in three say that their mental health is either fair or poor. And there's another really strong stat to identify 50% of that age group, that young adult age group 18 to 29 identified that in the last year they are always anxious or always usually anxious. And whereas the difference for all adults was one in three. But 50% of that age group said in the last year, I am always anxious. And you think about what that means they're bringing into the workplace or the organizations that they work in. And it's challenging. It's really, really real. And it's challenging. Just one other stat that came out of this that I think is super interesting, 6 out of 10 adults who identify that they aren't getting the help they need for their mental health situation, say that the common reasons are either I'm too busy, I can't take time off work, or I don't have the money. So when we think about that, that's, you know, are people getting the help they need? And if they're not, why aren't they? These are interesting topics to reflect on as well.

- What do you say to those people who say things like, you know why don't you just pull yourself up by your bootstraps? Like, you know, all of this is just whining and you know when I was younger, you know, I feel like we hear that still and I'm surprised by it, but it still happens. You know, how are you coaching employers when we find those people in our organizations who kind of have that mentality of you know, this generation coming in might be weaker, they just haven't learned, you know, how to be tough.

- I mean, I would actually say this generation is stronger and more resilient. I think that our world has changed. There is no doubt, you know, just to give an acronym that we sometimes teach in our trainings there's an acronym known as VUCA that was an acronym identified originally by the military. And this acronym was used decades ago to describe war-like conditions. And VUCA stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. And I would argue that decades ago when the military is identifying that as a war-like condition for World War II or Korea or Vietnam or Afghanistan, we are now living in that type of environment every single day. It's volatile, it's uncertain, it's complex, it's ambiguous. So times with technology and globalization and the pandemic and systemic inequality and racism, times have just changed. And there are stressors today that I think are different than the stressors from many, many decades ago. So I would say that when people say get over it or pull yourself up by the bootstraps or whatever it is, they say, you know it's important to educate people on what mental health is and how it can impact a family, an organization, or a community. And there's some pretty simple questions that in an organization, we can ask our team members or people like, are you

constantly procrastinating? Are you constantly overwhelmed? Are you constantly paralyzed with some type of insecurity or fear? Do you find yourself toxic and negative and cynical and reactive? Has your reservoir of new ideas really dried up? Do you avoid collaboration and in, you know, are you feeling unengaged? I mean, if the answer to those questions is yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, I think it's important for you to pay attention as an organization. So I think it's about educating what the impact that mental health can have not only on a business organization, but on people and individuals and families and the communities they operate in. So, and when you think about it that way, hopefully there's some increased empathy and increased awareness.

- Yeah, absolutely. I was gonna ask this question next, but I think you've already answered it around, you know should companies take responsibility for their employees' mental health? And I think the answer is yes, because when you think about the dynamics of the business and all the talk we have right now around culture and employee experience, that's a piece of it. We need to start looking at our employees holistically and not just as cogs in the wheel, right, to get the work done. So I'll ask you a different question then. How do you think about these complexities that you've shared and now you layer in intersectionality, because that has a dramatic effect on different, different populations are experiencing mental health in different ways right now.

- That's true. Different populations are experiencing mental health issues or exacerbations in different ways. And as an organization, I think that the education piece is important. It's important to understand from a diversity and an inclusion and an equity conversation, it's important to understand what these different demographics are going through because you are collaborating, potentially hopefully, with a diverse workforce. And not only is self-awareness critical and key to success and performance and wellbeing, but social awareness is key and necessary if people want teams and organizations wanna be successful. So dialing up the awareness of different demographics and whether you are feeling it or not, understanding and stepping into the shoes of another, you know this whole concept of empathy is critical for human beings to be productive, successful, connected, all those kinds of things. So I think it's important to educate and to have the open dialogue so that there can be empathy and social awareness. And then I think there is training that needs to take place to help improve people's wellbeings and open up our own ability to talk about it.

- So let's talk tactics a little bit 'cause I think sometimes you know, you might be listening, you're like, yeah, I agree with all this, but like, how do I implement something? You know, and in your space, you talk a lot about mindfulness, right? And some practices there around reducing stress. So, you know, what are some tactics we can take as HR professionals to, you know, increase mindfulness,

increase resiliency, have more open conversations around you know, holistic mental health?

- Sure, well, you know, I'm a mindfulness-based stress reduction teacher and we deploy a lot of those practices in our executive coaching programs. Mindfulness, a lot of people think of it as just meditation. And one thing to just dial up awareness about meditation happens to be one way in to practicing mindfulness, but mindfulness is a much bigger modality. We can think about mindfulness as various mixed modalities that can exercise certain networks and regions in the brain and the networks and the regions in the brain that mindfulness practices, whether they're meditation or other practices, the various regions that are exercised are often regions that get little or no training otherwise. And they are regions that are closely connected to our ability to be more aware of ourself and socially aware of others, regions that are required to increase our focus and ability to control our attention so that we can concentrate on certain tasks and actually get things done. Regions that increase our own connection to empathy, kindness, compassion and regions that expand our perspective which is really helpful when we're talking about new ideas, innovation, strategy conversations, all these sorts of things. Now we cannot exercise those regions of the brain and we can exercise other regions of the brain that are really emotionally reactive, that are on autopilot, that trip our conditional bias or implicit bias or conditional habits that activate the stress hormones in our body and take our brains along with it. So, you know, it all depends what regions of the brain you wanna strengthen. And I think when you think about the regions of the brain that we scientifically know that mindfulness strengthens it's a pretty easy case to say that we should be offering mindfulness-based programs to our organizations to train those regions of the brain, because they support optimal performance. They also support wellbeing and resilience and they support a certain culture that most organizations are trying to create. So how do you do that? Okay, well you can offer wellbeing and meditation programs. you can offer coaching programs, some of the ways in are through, you know, breath exercises. Some of the ways in are through creative expression, some of the ways in are through cognitive training. There's all kinds of ways in. And so I would encourage organizations to explore them and figure out which is gonna be best or which ways are gonna be best for your culture.

- One of the things that we've done on our HR team is starting our meetings out by giving a one word descriptor of where we're sitting right now. And the first time we did it, I was like, this feels weird. Like, I think we only had a choice of like five different words and I was like and no explanation, so you don't go into details about why you're feeling, how you're feeling. And some of the words were like sad, angry. And as we continued to do that exercise and we became more comfortable about it, what was great was that you were able to for yourself identify what was happening in your body and why you were

feeling that way. So you kind of knew going into the discussion maybe some triggers you needed to be aware of personally. And then externally, as you're listening to, you know your peers go around the room, if somebody said the moment that they were in was sad, you might not necessarily approach a topic the same way you would've approached it if you didn't have that information. So not only did it give us an opportunity personally to know where we're at, but it also built a different sense of collaboration and it brought a lot of empathy to the room. So that was a really great tactic that we used.

- It's amazing. We call that in our trainings giving ourselves a moment to arrive and then we actually go around the room and say, I arrive. And exactly what you just said, Shari, one or two words about how you arrive. It not only dials up your own self-awareness about yourself but it dials up your social awareness around other people. And both of these things are, they make us more emotionally intelligent human beings. And it's really all about emotional intelligence. I mean, we teach at Inseus that how is it that we can navigate this volatile, uncertain, complex ambiguous world? Well, dialing up your emotional intelligence skills through some mindfulness-based practices is a way to do it basically in a nutshell. And that's just one very simple, but effective exercise that you just identified. And there's so many others that are exactly like that, that are, you know just a way to kick off a meeting, a way to close a meeting, a way to listen, a way to respond even in the midst of intense, heightened emotion. All all these things we can sort of practice. They don't have to be sitting on a cushion and meditating for 20 minutes. Although I'm a huge meditator myself and we teach meditation as well certainly there's gonna be tremendous benefit and that's a whole 'nother topic that I could chat with you about, scientific benefits to meditation. But there are other ways to practice presence and practice pausing that automatic autopilot response that really comes from an unaware emotional place. We can sort of pause that and we can come from a more strategic place, a more aware place, a more connected place.

- There's so much research out there that shows, you know empathy and caring in the business world will equal greater profits, will equal greater engagement. But sometimes it's really hard to get there with your C-suite. How have you either coached leaders at that level to think about this differently or coached, you know those who need to influence leaders at that level?

- Depending on the level of skepticism, we might dip into a little more neuroscience behind some of it but ultimately the practices are the same. And once a leader absorbs a certain practice and can be open-minded about trying to be present through a certain practice, there's usually a big aha moment. There is usually a pretty massive shift. I mean, we do a lot of work around where am I as a leader in this moment? Am I, you know, above the line or below the line in terms

of this line being a place of openness and curiosity and expanded perspective? Or am I below the line coming from a place of scarcity, coming from a place of fear, coming from a place of ego? And you know, there's some ways that we can step outside the languaging of mindfulness and step into the languaging of business and production and results and relationship building. And I think it's pretty hard to not respond to some of that if you just language it the right way. I mean, we meet everyone where they are and I think most good leadership development trainers or coaches do that, meet everyone where they are including the skeptics who might be very resistant. So that's okay, we can drop the mindfulness language or anything that you perceive as woo-woo and we can move into some other language that's a little more hard hitting, a little more direct and see how that floats your boat.

- Yeah, I appreciate that and I think that's such good advice as you don't, if you know that, that you're not if you're gonna miss the mark speaking to that leader in that way, think strategically about the words that you're gonna use. And I really like leaning into neuroscience. I have to find a neuroscientist to bring on the podcast 'cause I think it's just such a fascinating topic, especially when you learn about some of the things you shared about different ways of activating different parts of your brain and how that's gonna show up. So as we close out our conversation and you think about the HR practitioners who are listening and they personally wanna develop their own mindfulness skills, what's maybe one piece of advice that you would say try this, start this today in your practice 'cause it's a good place to start.

- I would say start just wherever you are noticing the present moment. And you can use the breath to notice the present moment. So this is why so many mindfulness teachers use the breath because the breath is always real time. It is not in the past, it is not thinking about the future which is what our brains usually do. But your breath and your body are present moment tools, if you will. So turning your attention to the breath, turning your attention to sensations, physical sensations in the body, this is a great place to start. Take 10 seconds, 30 seconds one minute, three minutes, five minutes. There are meditations you can plug in that if you'd like to certainly use our website, we offer some free guided meditations but so do a million different websites. It doesn't matter. Plug into present moment awareness. Can I feel my breath? Can I feel my body? If those two things are challenging for you, notice sounds, sounds in the environment are real time and just practice being present for 30 seconds to start. Notice when the mind wanders and all of a sudden you're thinking about your to-do list as opposed to the sound of the birds. Just notice it. Do not criticize yourself. It is absolutely what our human mind is actually wired and built to do. And then you just bring your mind back to the present moment again when you notice that it's wandered and that you can think of it almost like a bicep curl. It's a bicep curl for the brain, for your neurons in the brain.

Like, oh, I noticed that my brain wander. Okay, now bring it back. Well, you just did a bicep curl or you just did an ab crunch. And that's what mindfulness is. It's mental training, it's a mental training. So start there.

- That is our tweetable quote for this episode. Practicing mindfulness is like doing a bicep curl. I absolutely love it. Ashley, thanks for such a great discussion today.

- Thank you, Shari, it's always a pleasure.

- I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and wings at [thehrmixtape.com](http://thehrmixtape.com). Come back often and please subscribe, rate and review.