McMaster Program for Faculty Development (MacPFD)

Spark Podcast

Official Transcript

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Featured Guest: Dr. Huma Ali
Interviewer: Dr. Ruth Chen
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Dr. Ruth Chen (00:02):

Welcome to the MacPFD Sparkle podcast. This is Ruth Chen and in the Sparkle sub series, we'll bring you shorter segments released in between our longer Spark episodes. We'll have new and exciting interviews with professionals from across the world, helping you to achieve your personal and professional goals as a healthcare educator, researcher, leader, or practitioner at any stage of your career. So sit back, listen, and enjoy this episode of the MacPFD Sparkle podcast.

In this segment Huma Ali shares her experiences with the Rock the Podium course delivered by McMaster's Program for Faculty Development. Huma reflects on the process of creating this presentation and of leading self through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Welcome to the Spark podcast. Today I have the pleasure of speaking with Huma Ali, an Emergency Medicine Physician in the Alberta Health Services and Clinical Assistant Professor at the University of Calgary. Welcome Huma, happy to have you here.

Dr. Huma Ali (01:13):

It's a pleasure to be here.

Dr. Ruth Chen (01:14):

Now I met you through the Rock the Podium course you joined this past year and to provide a bit of background for our listeners Rock the Podium is a speaker development series delivered by McMaster's Program for Faculty Development. You can learn more about the Rock the Podium course on our MacPFD website. So for you, Huma, you're out in Alberta, how did you hear about this course in Ontario and why did you decide to sign up?

Dr. Huma Ali (01:39):

So I was invited to be a speaker at a conference for the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians, and in that invitation, two speakers, they included a reference to the Rock the Podium course, so I accepted to speak and then I also perused the website and I thought to myself why not up my speaking skills? And it looked really interesting. The people who were putting on the course, I had heard of before and I loved their ability to communicate, and I thought why not communicate more effectively the message that I'm trying to get across?

Dr. Ruth Chen (02:16):

That's great. So throughout this course, you developed and shared an incredible presentation with us that we then wanted to highlight as a closing plenary at our MacPFD conference this past May. The title of your talk was Leading Self, A Journey Through the Pandemic, and you know that I found your talk to be extremely powerful. I must have told you over a dozen times now how much your talk inspired me. So I was wondering why did you decide on this topic, and take us through your thinking process behind developing this presentation?

Dr. Huma Ali (02:52):

Thank you so much for your kind words, and that really means a lot to me. I know that I did the presentation and I made that talk, but I also think about that talk and the principles that were highlighted in that talk fairly regularly as well. The inspiration behind this talk probably dates back two or two and a half years prior to the Rock the Podium course, when I decided to apply for a master's program at Royal Roads University in Victoria. It's an amazing program of healthcare leadership and my focus and my interest has always been physician wellness. And I was thinking to myself how can I further delve into not only physician wellness, but how can I bring forth physician wellness to the forefront of our minds as doctors? That was the premise behind why I applied to get into this master's program.

And in this leadership program, there are many principles of leadership that they highlight obviously, and one of the things that resonated the most with me was leading self. How can you know yourself better, understand yourself better, so that you can inspire and lead others and inspire others to lead themself better? I think that had resonated, like I said, resonated with me as one of the leadership principles that was brought up through this master's program.

And I was invited at the end of my master's program to do a presentation about the healthcare workers experience. It was a leadership series, kind of like a conference there Royal Roads was holding. Every few weeks they were highlighting some topic of leadership and this specific one was leadership and healthcare. So they asked me to share a little bit about my own experience being on the front lines as an emergency physician working in Calgary, and I thought to myself there are so many aspects that I could potentially highlight. There could be the sadness of sitting in a room with a patient, the angst that you see in their eyes when they can't breathe, the responsibility to intervene and help, which is so innate, but also so taxing to do.

I could have highlighted the difficulties we experience as healthcare workers amongst our colleagues seeing the tragedy we see at work with patients that seems to be unacknowledged by some part of our society that this isn't real, that this is a conspiracy, that there's all these almost negating of our experience in the emergency department. There were so many things that I could potentially highlight, but I decided to take a step back from this and didn't want to get lost in the weeds and the details. And I thought to myself what we're experiencing as healthcare workers is obviously, very unique, but it is no different than a human being going through a really hard time, trying to make sense of what they're seeing and trying to do their best and be their best throughout the experience.

I think that when I sort of took a step back and realized there's many things I can highlight, but I want to speak to not just emergency physicians, I want to speak to not just frontline healthcare workers, I wanted to speak to and share with people how can we be our best in circumstances that are tragic, and that really are working essentially against us and taking away our sanity and our peace. And I think that's one of the reasons why I decided to highlight the science based principles of how we can truly be happier and improve our well being despite external circumstances.

Dr. Ruth Chen (06:55):

Thank you for sharing the behind the scenes. As I'm listening to you talk, I just think you're giving us that behind the scenes peek into your thought processes, your experiences, what you were thinking through and going through at the time that generated this talk. And I wanted to mention as a note for the listeners on this podcast episode page, we will also be including the link to your recorded presentation from the MacPFD conference, so everyone can go and listen to that presentation as well.

So have you had the opportunity to give this presentation elsewhere or record this for other audiences?

Dr. Huma Ali (07:38):

I presented it at Royal Roads Healthcare Leadership conference that they'd asked me to present at, and the audience was multidisciplinary and there were a lot of people who were not in healthcare. And I think that my goal was achieved in this presentation where I wasn't, like I said, speaking to the healthcare worker how to get through a rough day at work, it was how can we as human beings get through difficult times optimizing what we see in science actually improves your well being.

So yeah, I did present it and it was very well received, and like I said earlier, I often think back to those principles. Maybe a little bit of background in terms of what I brought up in that talk. It was informed, and I mentioned this in the presentation as well, a lot of my content was informed by a course called The Science of Well-Being, which is a Yale University course by the Dr. Laurie Santos, who now has a podcast, but also has this course online available for free. And she walks you through each of the principles that I highlighted, but she discusses the science behind why do these specific things work to improve your well being and improve your happiness no matter where you are and what you do for a living, what your ethnicity, gender, it doesn't matter. If you're a human being, the science shows that these things when practiced authentically improve your well being.

And I thought speaking both at the Royal Roads conference, but also for the MacPFD conference, a lot of people being scientifically minded, I thought what better way to get this message across than to share something that is scientifically backed? It's not pulled out of the air and try this, maybe you'll feel better. There are rigorous studies that have been done that shows that this actually improves your well being.

Dr. Ruth Chen (09:40):

Yes, and I'm familiar with Laurie Santos' podcast as well and her course at Yale. And something that I remember taking away from her podcast was the need to continually practice or to continue to work on and apply those principles. So for yourself, how had this whole process, not just of delivering the presentation, but in looking at the science of health and well being, how has that shifted your own perspective and your practices?

Dr. Huma Ali (10:13):

That's a great question, Ruth. Thank you for asking that question. I think that the way that I've been able to integrate this into my life is that I am so much more aware now than maybe a year and a half ago what truly improves my happiness. I think that before I felt this innate sense of if I buy those shoes or if I make this much money, or if I engage in X, Y, Z, I do feel better. It does make me feel good.

But when I continue to watch what happens is that there's this hedonic adaptation where I keep seeing those shoes and they're not as nice or they don't look as good, and they just end up being an

old pair of shoes in the back of my closet. And I recognize that that happens now, whereas before I just would just forget, I would just remember that high I got when I bought the shoes and then when those got boring, I would just buy more shoes. So I recognize that that happens.

And then further to that, when it comes to those principles of what truly improves your well being, like social connection, when I'm connecting with another human being, whether virtually or in person, I have that at the forefront of my mind. Not only am I connecting with another human being, I know that this is actually making me happier. So I feel as though I'm doing something good for myself, and maybe subconsciously, I knew that, that's why we do want to socially connect, we want to be with other people, but having that sense of awareness of this is really good for my heart right now, allows me to appreciate that experience in another sphere altogether because I know I'm doing something good for my own well being, whereas I wouldn't have had that insight earlier, so it just makes my times of social connection even richer.

Dr. Ruth Chen (12:00):

And I imagine that your colleagues, your friends, your family around you have also been exposed to your thinking or that you've bounced ideas off of them, or I'm sure you've shared some of your insights with them, and so it has an effect on those around you as well in your environment, and it has shaped your environment.

Dr. Huma Ali (12:20):

Yeah, and I think it's sort of tricky because it's one of those things I think ... What's that saying? The teacher appears when the student is ready? I'm not sure who said it, but I guess what I'm trying to highlight is that had I stumbled upon this material pre COVID, it would not have had the same weight as it does having gone through the circumstances and the internal turmoil and seeing the suffering and working on the front lines and thinking to myself, what am I doing? What's important? What are my values? And how do I want to live for the rest of my life?

And really COVID has sort of pigeonholed me into really questioning those things and what I'm trying to get to is that yes, I share this with my family, yes, I share this with my friends, and I try to lead in keeping with what I've learned and what I believe, but I don't think that it necessarily speaks to everybody because it feels really good to buy a big house and a nice car and new shoes and new clothes.

And when I share, for example, like with my own ... I can think of one family member in particular, if I share with them that there is this concept of hedonic adaptation, they can understand that but I don't think that everybody is in a place to actually live into it or appreciate that. So I think I'm hopefully putting in new ideas into people's heads so they can maybe think and reflect and see if it fits for them and their life, but I don't think these concepts are for everybody. I don't think they're concepts that will resonate with everybody, and I think that's totally okay because this is all different and unique and we live life differently.

Dr. Ruth Chen (13:59):

And it'll speak to people at different times, and you never know whether something that you say now might resonate with them in the future at a time that you didn't plan or expect, and so it's okay. And it really does highlight going back to the title of your talk around leading self and how you wanted to focus that on that in your own course as well. So it's that whole aspect of leading self, being responsible for ourselves, and our own development, our own journeys.

Dr. Huma Ali (14:29):

I think that there's something to be said about leading yourself and modeling that for others. I think when, I can speak for myself, when I try to live into my own values and live, according to my values, I think there is leadership in that because other people are influenced by that, that Huma is trying to identify her values and live true to her values. I hope that I inspire others to think the same of their own life. Like I don't expect other people to have my values, but think to themselves, what are my values and am I living into them? I think there's that inspirational leadership aspect to it when you're true to yourself and lead yourself authentically.

Dr. Ruth Chen (15:12):

Definitely. Your words, Huma, have always and continue to inspire me, even in the brief moments of conversation or email or me listening to your presentation. Those all have inspired me, and I really appreciate the time that you're taking today to speak with me.

Dr. Huma Ali (15:34):

Thank you so much. I really appreciate your words and your praise. I think at the end of the day if we can learn to live in our authentic ways according to principles that are important to us and share with others what the science shows helps, and then people can do what they want with that ultimately, but I think informing others of what the science shows is what's really important. So I really appreciate having had the opportunity to be that closing plenary at MacPFD and the opportunity to share in this dialogue with you in this podcast, because I think the more avenues we can get the word out there on how to live an authentically happier life science based, I think that's really the goal. That's what my heart desires, so thank you for the opportunity.

Dr. Ruth Chen (16:20):

Thank you, Huma. And again, the link to your presentation will be on the podcast episode page. So thanks, Huma. Good to talk with you.

Dr. Huma Ali (16:20):

Thank you.

Speaker 3 (16:32):

Thank you so much for tuning in to the MacPFD Spark Podcast. Just so you know, this podcast has been brought to you by the McMaster Faculty of Health Sciences and specifically the Office of Continuing Professional Development and the Program for Faculty Development. If you're interested in finding out more about what we can offer for faculty development check out our website at www.macpfd.ca that's www.M-A-C-P-F-D.ca. Many of our events are actually web events that are free. Finally, I'd like to thank our sound engineer Mr. Nick Hoskin who has been an amazing asset to our team, thanks so much Nick for all that you do. And also thank you to Scott Holmes for supplying us the music that you've been listening to. All right. So until next time this is MacPFD Spark signing off.