

## Episode 6– The Wellness Center

*Lauren invites a Student Government Association senator and a Wellness Center staff member to share what they are doing to help others (and even themselves) destress and prioritize their health and well-being.*

*[Theme music begins]*

Lauren: Welcome to the Coogcast, a resource to support your success in college and beyond. UH Cougars are here to discuss topics that matter to you, that way you can be the best student and global citizen you can be. I'm your host, Lauren.

*[Theme music fades out]*

Lauren: It's Winter in Houston, its dark, its gloomy, it does get cold here in Texas sometimes. *[laughs]* **If you're struggling, you're not alone.** One resource we have on campus is the UH Wellness Center. I have invited two guests to share with us how they help support the UH community. Natalia Marinero, a UH student and Reuben Parrish, the Director of the UH Wellness Center. Thank you both for chatting with me today.

Reuben: Thank you for having me.

Natalia: Thank you.

Lauren: Natalia, last semester you organized an event at the UH Wellness Center where therapy dogs were brought in and students were able to go by and sit and play with them. Can you tell us how you got involved with the Wellness Center?

Natalia: Yeah, of course! I actually got involved through student government. I was senator in student government and I needed an initiative. I decided that mental health was my initiative and another fellow senator actually said that the UH Wellness Center is a great place if you want to get connected at UH and come up with ideas to bring other students in. So I contacted the UH Wellness Center, about what I wanted and I came up with the idea of having therapy dogs and emotional support animals come and destress the student body. Not just during finals, but also around the semester because we are stressed students and we are going through a pandemic. It's crazy out there!

Lauren: I really appreciated the therapy dogs. I went a couple times and I really loved it, and just connecting with the therapy dog owners, they all have unique personalities which is also really fun. Reuben, what can students find when they visit the UH Wellness Center?

Reuben: **Yeah that's a very good** question. They can find a wealth of information and a wealth of things to do. Were here to provide as much information to students on

campus to make well informed decisions on campus as well as off campus. And **that's through our workshops that we have**, we have four different workshops a semester, as well as consultation visits that students can come in and talk about any health or well-being topic they would like to talk about and I say **that's more** surface level. Just like an iceberg, most of the time the surface level is just that tip of the iceberg, the rest of it we have to roll over to another department on campus. We also have some different events, as you heard, like the therapy dogs, and we have Tea Tuesdays, any student can come in and relax and hang out in the office and get free tea. And then we do Meditation Thursdays. So we do a lot for students to be able to come in and learn about health and wellbeing in all aspects of their life.

Lauren: Something that I definitely noticed coming back to campus was how much the UH Wellness Center was offering support to students, with everybody of course having anxieties and things, like not only about the pandemic, but just thinking back to how school used to be and getting back into that has been really stressful for a lot of students. Like I know I've gone to a lot of events, I know a lot of ambassadors have gone to a lot of the events, so it's just like something that I **really appreciate what y'all are doing. So switching it back over to Natalia**, what made you think of bringing in therapy dogs when thinking of ideas for your initiative?

Natalia: When I was in high school, I went to tour Stephen F. Austin State University, and one of the things that they kind of grabbed my attention with was that during finals, they would bring dogs to the library and when you're studying, you can sign up to go pet the dogs and they have a whole room of the dogs. I thought that was a really cool idea. I started looking at other universities and what they did for their finals week, everybody does something different, and I saw that Yale has bulldogs and UH has their own that the UH Wellness Center does put on along with many other events, but the one thing that was missing for me was the beginning of the semester, midterms, so that idea really was just a step up from what we already do here.

Lauren: I love that! I love that you were able to take things that you saw and then making **it your own, and making it like part of UH's. So this question** is now for the both of you, what was the student response like for that event? Or like for your therapy dog event, or even if you wanna take, I know that the UH Wellness Center did like two weeks of finals stress relief, like finals mania stuff, so if you wanna talk about student response for those events?

Reuben: Yeah, I can go first. It was a great response, um, better than our workshop and **other events and things that we've held**. And you brought up, is our online wellness, is an event that we do every single semester, at the end of the semester.

There's one day where we bring in masseuses to do chair massages and we get to give out some free food. DIY projects, resources, campus resources, more so academic resources, not just from, because wellness is one of six departments under the Health and Wellbeing portfolio and the Division of Student Affairs. So you have CAPS, Counseling and Psychological Services, you have Campus Recreation, you have the Justin Dart Student Accessibility Center, you have Cougars In Recovery and you have the Health Center. So, with us, 6 departments. So students really love the time that Natalia did her event and that was just a nice segue into our event because then **students were like 'oh my gosh, there's more dogs and another day you're having dogs,' because when we have a day, that one day, we had in our office and we were just completely packed. But, they were masked, a lot of them were wearing masks and we were recommending to wear a mask and everything and students loved it. It doesn't matter if it's a puppy, to a big dog, to a fluffy dog, to a small dog. As long as there's a dog in the building, they're coming to it.**

Natalia: Yeah, I think the students really responded well! I heard people conversing and they were destressing with the owner, not just the dogs.

Lauren: Yeah, for sure. So getting into ideas of, like, events and initiatives, so I think a lot of students might have ideas, kinda like you, where they want to implement something or host something, so how would you go about with that idea, like how would you start that, how would you get the event off the ground?

Natalia: **That's a great question. Honestly, my best answer would be get involved.** And I know it's easier said than done, but I think UH has made a great platform and a great service to be involved. You have your UH Go app, **that's a great way to get involved, they have an events calendar you can look at, that's how I got to backpack that I did my first semester here.** I also saw UH Wellness on there and **was like that's a great name: UH Wellness, I should go visit! And if you have an idea, if you have an initiative, that you would like to see that hasn't been done yet, I would research on your UH access and Get Involved icon, and just go through pages and pages of clubs and organizations and associations, that have descriptions, that have members in there, and just talk to the members, talk to the president. I think that once you converse with them, even bounce ideas off of each other, something will happen, that's the beauty of college and university.** Something can happen with the congregation of the student body.

Lauren: I agree. Something that my parents always told me when I was unsure is: The worst they can say is no and the best is you can create something new and actually do something with it. **I think that's a very good point of just put yourself out there. If you're nervous about doing it on your own and work as a team to get where you want to go.**

So what are some healthy habits or tools that you use to promote your own well-being or like you would recommend for students?

Natalia: Personally, it is hard. I do have anxiety, when it comes to tests when it comes to school. When I destess, I personally have to take a breather and step back. I take a **mental health day and don't do anything. Take some time for myself, like washing my hair, washing my face, just some destresser things.** A new thing I recently picked up was volleyball. I think exercising is a great way to destress.

Lauren: **That's my sport!**

Natalia: (*laughs*) I just started playing in the women's club, again, get involved, I have tryouts this week, but I get to do this on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so after school I just sweat it out **and don't worry about anything academically. So, if you're not athletic, I understand, there's many other things you can do. There's a chess club. There's a video game club. If you like sports but can't physically play, there's e-sports.** Just hanging out with friends is a great way to destress. Talk to someone. **Don't be alone, that's one of my biggest things. If you keep it in, it's not really going to help you.**

Rueben: Ditto. (*laughs*) That was wonderful. Um, for me, it's **really** just taking and scheduling time out for myself. Everybody knows their work schedule, class schedule, whatever schedule they have, but typically never put in their "me time" or "my time" or whatever a person wants to call it. So, I do have it. I schedule it out, time to destress, be able to go for a walk, work out, be with my family, since I'm an older person here (*laughs*). So being able to be with my daughter, helping her out with the things she does, **so it's almost giving as well, for me, to reduce stress, is giving to others. And that's where a lot of other folks may just give too much and get super stressed out, and so thats when it comes to taking your "me time" and doing for yourself before giving to someone else.** As well as picking up that hobby. Yes, it may not be sports, but we have a list of things that we provide **in our workshops, but we always say: this list isn't for everybody, you need to find what works for you. If it's painting, if it's dancing, is it skating.** So, dancing is one of mine. So, I just go out and dance and just **dance when I'm grocery shopping** and people look at me like **what's going on... and I'm like hey, I'm just relaxing.**

**It's** just finding what works for you. I tell students a lot of times: hey, whatever you were doing when you were young that made you happy and feel good and you think is childish right now, think about it and see if you can start doing it again. If it was just running around and sliding in the mud or whatever, find a place to do that, **and so it's really just finding what works for you and just having fun.**

Lauren: I like that. I like that idea of like finding what you enjoyed before and picking that **back up. I think that's a really good idea.**

Natalia: A lot of people take more than they can handle. I personally cannot take 18 hours of classes. So, I take four classes a semester. A lot of people forget that not just taking a break is important, you also need to know how much you can handle. I **think it's great that you can dance . . . I personally can't dance, but if I could, I would** (*laughs*).

Lauren: **I agree. Especially when you're making your** schedule for the next semester, I can do this back-to-back and you jam-pack your schedule. My mentality is always like: Well, I went to high school and that was like 8 to 4 and then I try to do it again **and I can't do it.**

Natalia: **I don't know how I did that.**

Lauren: **I don't know either. I don't how I had that drive. I definitely feel that idea of like** you sometimes overpack yourself and then you're burned out every single day at the end of the day and it kind of just adds up. Taking time for yourself is very important. I guess this kind of leads into our next question. So, Reuben, what do you feel are some unique health-related challenges facing college students, and how does the Wellness Center work in helping them?

Reuben: Really taking time for themselves. **It's looking at** how to be in life. How to live life. Health and well-being is everything. **We take a holistic approach. So we're really** looking at how students are relating to others. Being connected to the university, **if you're not feeling connected, you're not feeling like you belong somewhere and** so that belongingness, connectiveness is really big, especially going through COVID, and still coming out at the tail end of it possibly, hopefully, students are finally getting to the point where they were online and now how do I get involved? Not having that social connectedness and social wellness that they are not able to find it because we were **all masked up and we couldn't get together. So, we're providing the meditation so students can just breathe for 5 minutes or** just relax and take time out and be able to say no.

And this is biggest thing to that we do to help students: the consultations. We have **a place for students just to be able to talk to someone, and I just listen. I'm a** sounding board. I just sit here and students are like **"That was wonderful, thank you."** And they walk off. **And they don't want anything from me, they don't want** any answers, they just wanted to talk to someone and they are like ok, thank you. Being able to get them connected and feel like they belong and help them realize what they can do for themselves so they can be successful.

Lauren: You kind of answered my next question which is what is the best way students can utilize the Wellness Center?

Reuben: Yeah, go to the website. Check out our calendar, you can see the events and the programs coming up **as well as how to request a workshop if you're in a student org. Volunteer with The Cougar Cupboard, that's through our office as well, that's** free food for all students on campus are eligible for that.

Lauren: **Do y'all have an Instagram people can follow?**

Reuben: **Yeah, UH Wellness Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Come see us, we're here 9 to 6 at the Campus Recreation Wellness Center.**

Lauren: **I'll definitely be seeing you this semester. But thank you so much.**

Reuben: Thank you!

Natalia: Thank you!

Lauren: Like Reuben said, y'all can find more information about the UH Wellness Center **on their website, and their office is located inside the Rec Center. See y'all in the next episode. Go Coogs!**