

# STL Ep 8: Karen Tang

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

meditation, students, mindfulness, burnout, compassion, addiction, experience, strategies, behavioral addiction, research, individuals, acknowledging, interested, feeling, stress, disorder, study, care, develop, comorbid disorders

## SPEAKERS

Karen Tang, Amanda Reavey



Amanda Reavey 00:02

Hello, my name is Amanda Reavey. Welcome to The Stereotype Life, where we talk about mental health, disability, and access in higher education. We release new episodes every other Wednesday at 12pm Central. So please subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts, and visit [www.stereotype.life](http://www.stereotype.life) for this episode's transcript and additional resources. My name is Amanda Reavey, and today I'm here with Karen Tang, who has a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of Calgary, and is currently in the Ph.D Clinical Psychology Program at Dalhousie University. In her research on addiction, Karen is primarily interested in examining comorbid disorders, specifically behavioral addictions and mental health correlates, e.g. gambling, disorder, and depression, which she recently published a paper on. Hi Karen, thank you for being here today.



Karen Tang 00:58

Hi Amanda! Thank you again for having me.



Amanda Reavey 01:01

In the realm of health psychology, Karen is actively involved in research on chronic health conditions and the role of mindfulness and self-compassion. She hopes to combine both

research interests in an upcoming study on addiction, mental health, and self-compassion. In her spare time, Karen enjoys volunteering and traveling. So Karen, can you briefly describe your background and how you became interested in researching comorbid disorders?



Karen Tang 01:28

Absolutely. So I completed my Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology at the University of Calgary in Canada. And during that time, I got involved in conducting research in various domains of psychology, including social psychology, cognitive psychology and decision making, personality psychology, and then health psychology. And it wasn't until my last year in undergrad during my undergraduate honors thesis that I really got into researching gaming disorder or video game addiction. That was when my interest in addiction was solidified. And because we know that addiction rarely occurs in isolation, this is why I'm really interested in looking at comorbid disorders, meaning co-occurring conditions. So for example, video game addiction and depression, or gambling and anxiety.



Amanda Reavey 02:24

Cool. So one of your published papers focused on individuals with gambling disorders and other psychiatric disorders, such as food bingeing and substance use. Who are the students or people, in general, most at risk for developing co-occurring disorders, and is there any way to prevent it?



Karen Tang 02:44

That's a really good question. So, my study, conducted in collaboration with Andrew Kim and Dr. David Hudgins, Daniel McGrath and Hernando Trevaris, we looked at over 400 individuals who are seeking treatment for their gambling addiction, and whether they had one or more comorbid or co-occurring behavioral addictions. Meaning, we compared individuals who had a diagnosis of gambling disorder only with those who had comorbid gambling disorder and at least one other behavioral addiction. So specifically, we looked at work addiction, exercise, food bingeing, sex, and shopping. And in our sample, we found that the most common co-occurring behavioral addiction was actually food bingeing and the least was exercise. So in terms of our findings, we found that individuals tended to be younger, have greater rates of co-occurring PTSD, so Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and bulimia nervosa, which is an eating disorder characterized by binge eating, followed by purging in those who have tended to have gambling disorder as well as a comorbid

behavioral addiction. And so, we concluded that individuals may be turning to addictions to cope with their distress.



Amanda Reavey 04:11

I hadn't thought about actually PTSD and addiction. So in some ways, maybe the addiction is they're trying to deal with, like their anxiety, or post traumatic stress symptoms, or whatever the case may be. So it's not like someone just decides to have an addiction or they just drink too much. But it's actually providing relief to some kind of emotional trauma.



Karen Tang 04:46

Exactly. So we're finding that – we know that approximately 35% to 50% of individuals seeking treatment for addictions actually have a lifetime diagnosis of PTSD. So they may be turning to addictions to cope with their distress or trauma from other experiences.



Amanda Reavey 05:07

Is there a way to prevent it?



Karen Tang 05:10

I can't speak too much about this, given I'm still a clinical psychologist trainee. But what I can say is that if you're working with a client who might have an addiction, you might also want to assess for PTSD or other types of trauma in their life, because that might be something that's warranted and looking into.



Amanda Reavey 05:33

So really, making sure that you're in some kind of psychotherapy or something, where they can help you work through the issues.



Karen Tang 05:47

Absolutely.



Amanda Reavey 05:48

Or identify and work through them. So, one thing I wondered quite a bit is how we support college students as they're coming into adulthood. Often the stereotype is that students work hard, play hard. I mean, I know that as an undergrad I definitely was that. Like, studying and going to class during the day and partying at night. But it can actually sometimes mask mental illness, and for me actually masked bipolar disorder, which I had no idea at the time. But yeah, so it sometimes can mask mental illness and co-occurring disorders, such as substance use that may have developed as a coping mechanism as you're talking about. Could you speak to that?



Karen Tang 06:34

Oh, yeah, absolutely. So I think your experience is actually not unique. So, I've observed in my peers that oftentimes college is where you're entering an exciting new phase in life, but it's also a very new or novel stressor. This might include moving across the country, moving out of your parents' house, or learning to really take care of yourself as a college student. And so, with the added stress of college and this newfound education, you might be trying to determine your future career. And then, often, peer pressures to fit in; substance use or other types of addictions may be something students are turning to in order to cope. And so research has found in terms of the work, hard play hard mentality, this might actually lead to burnout, which is defined as a negative emotional, physical, and mental reaction to prologues to prolonged stress, that results in exhaustion, frustration, lack of motivation, and a reduced ability in school. And so, again, like, I've also experienced burnout and you might have as well, and so this experience really isn't unique. It's very pervasive in the college student population, and so we know that university students, be it undergraduate or graduate students, are currently facing a mental health crises in higher education, which includes burnout. And so between 2009 and 2015, mental health diagnoses and treatment have actually increased dramatically for students for panic attacks, OCD, so Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, ADHD, Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and insomnia in undergraduate students. And so this experience itself really isn't unique and it's running pervasive throughout our campuses.



Amanda Reavey 08:48

I think that's the first ti- this is the first time I've ever heard a definition of burnout. That's like, "Yes," that was -that is totally my undergrad experience. I had no idea until you just said it that that was burnout. Like, my grades went down, I couldn't do anything, I was, like, in bed all the time. I just - and like, I couldn't concentrate. Like, "Yeah, that's totally right." That's total burnout. Wow. Like, lightbulb!



Karen Tang 09:19

Like, an epiphany moment right? I actually had like a major burnout experience, like, a few months ago right before the COVID pandemic hit. And I actually ended up having an anxiety attack because of this – or a panic attack because of this. And I – that was for me, I was like, "Whoa, I'm actually experiencing burnout" from all like the stresses of school and research and everything. And I think that made me really take a step back and look at – and reevaluate, like, my life choices and things like that.



Amanda Reavey 09:52

That's amazing. Like, what? I guess, actually, before I ask my next question, that makes me think about like, students and self-care. When they notice that burnout happening, what are steps that they can take to kind of mitigate it? Or can you mitigate it? I don't know.



Karen Tang 10:11

Mm hmm. Very good question. So, I always tell my friends that are going through really tough times that we always want to ensure you don't get to that point of burnout. Which is why I think self-care is incredibly vital to prevent you from getting to that point. So developing your self-care toolkit with strategies that really work for you is really vital to ensure that when and if you do reach the point of burnout, you can rely on these strategies to really pull you back to your, I guess, your happy place or your nice medium. And so ideally, again, you never want to reach that point of emotional and physical fatigue. So I'm a really big proponent of utilizing at least one self-care strategy each week to really try and prevent burnout. So, for example, one of my self-care strategies is to have coffee with friends, and I would note this down in my agenda and a very prominent color or, like, I might highlight it, I can easily see this and look forward to it. So really finding those strategies to work for you.



Amanda Reavey 11:28

So what kind of training should staff and faculty have to help students develop their self-care toolkit, or develop healthy coping strategies, and even better discernment when participating in college and campus life?



Karen Tang 11:48

Right, so from a very student perspective, I can draw on personal experience, as well as those of my peers. So we're calling back to when I was an undergrad. I found that it would

have been really helpful if staff and faculty could be more cognizant of the demands placed on students nowadays. Because in the present, just getting your undergrad degree isn't enough to land you a stable job afterwards. You also have to have work experience, extracurriculars, volunteer experience to really demonstrate that you're well-rounded, and that's so many things you need to juggle. Additionally, we're also paying so much more for higher education that most students have to take out loans or work multiple jobs in order to really afford their education. So this added financial stress is definitely a major stressor for most students. So I believe that if there was greater compassion and kindness in higher ed in general, I think this would be greatly appreciated by students.



Amanda Reavey 12:55

So do you even think like, maybe in the syllabus, in the way that they design their classes, just having more flexibility in turning in things or – because I can understand having compassion for students, but then how do I put that into something actionable?



Karen Tang 13:21

That's a really good question. So, maybe something you could do with the syllabus, but also, I think is really important for staff and faculty to really model, like, healthy self-care strategies. So drawing from a developmental psychology perspective, modeling is one way in which behavior is learned. So when a person observes the behavior of another and then imitates that behavior, he or she is modeling that behavior. So this is sometimes known as observational learning or social learning. And it's a type of vicarious learning and which direct instruction doesn't have to occur. So, in terms of examples, what this might mean is setting explicit boundaries, such as not responding to emails after work hours or on weekends. So if you are a staff or a faculty member or a research supervisor, you can demonstrate or show to your students that they don't have to reply to emails in the wee hours of the morning or on weekends, because you're also showing them that you don't respond to them.



Amanda Reavey 14:31

Well, and then that would help them develop boundaries and probably better time management skills. Like, "Oh, my professor is not going to respond to an email that I send after 7pm. So I better send it before then." Or, you know, "I better not wait 'til the last minute to ask a question about the homework because they said that they need 36 hours to respond." Or, you know. So yeah, so modeling it. And then being extremely explicit. Like, maybe saying the importance of self-care. Like I – "The reason that I don't answer email

after this time is because for my own self-care, and I expect you to develop self-care techniques for yourself as well." And then it puts the onus maybe on students to figure out what their self-care looks like.



Karen Tang 15:25

Absolutely, you nailed it.



Amanda Reavey 15:27

Cool. I know you've talked about this too, a little bit in your in your work. But one positive coping strategy that I'm particularly interested in is how we can develop mindfulness and self-compassion. So not just self- you know, not just compassion that instructors have for students, but self-compassion, you know - compassion that students have for themselves. So what is mindfulness? And how do we develop it? Why is it important to practice it? I know this is a lot of questions, but like, what are the benefits? Like, what - why? What's it for?



Karen Tang 16:08

That's a really good question. Okay, so I'll try to start from the [sic]. Sorry, start from the beginning. So mindfulness is the state of being present and fully engaged with whatever you're doing at the moment. So being free from distraction or judgment and being aware of your thoughts and feelings without getting too caught up in them. But more broadly defined, mindfulness is the ability to be fully present in the moment. And so, meditation is one way that we can achieve mindfulness. Specifically, we train in this moment-to-moment awareness through meditation, which allows us to build the skill of mindfulness. And so the direct benefits to mindfulness have been identified to be the ability to reduce anger or aggression, increase positive - increase positivity, and well-being, as well as reducing levels of stress, which I think a lot of students experience a lot of anyways. And so what I really like about mindfulness is that it really puts you more in touch with how you and your body are feeling in the moment. So for example, I might notice that when I'm practicing mindfulness that I often clench my jaw or I'm hunching my shoulders when I'm typing on my laptop. And so you can use mindfulness to take a nice break and really touch base with your body and relax yourself. And so, in terms of self-compassion, this concept is newer in terms of psychological research. So, clinical psychology has been studying meditation since the 70s, and more recently, they've integrated mindfulness meditation. However, in the last 10 years or so, self-compassion, which is championed by Drs. Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer. This is a similar but separate domain, and it has

begun to spring up in research, in a lot of different areas of psychology. And it's different from mindfulness which is being aware in our present moment, experience without judgment. And it's – self-compassion is more focused on bringing awareness to the individual, such as, how do we connect and relate to ourselves in our experience and includes a layer of sensitivity and awareness to our own personal suffering. Therefore, you can't have compassion without feeling and really acknowledging that pain and deep desire to want to alleviate the suffering, which I think directly correlates to mental health. And so, essentially, self-compassion is just experiencing a different way of relating to ourselves. So, I really like self-compassion, personally, because often when we experience suffering, we respond with self-criticism, harsh judgment, and we often tell ourselves to get over whatever pain we're feeling. But self-compassion allows you to take a pause and take a moment to reflect and really check in with ourselves. And you tend to speak to yourselves yourself in a more kind and gentle manner, similar to how you might speak to a friend when they're suffering. So I'm not sure if you've noticed this in your daily life as well, Amanda, but we are often a lot more kinder to our friends and family who are going through hard times.



Amanda Reavey 19:54

Yeah.



Karen Tang 19:55

So for example, if they do poorly on exam, you might tell them that, "Oh, Don't worry about it, you'll do a lot better next time." However, when we experience that same problem, we often default to that really harsh self-criticism path. So, for example, I might say, "Why am I so stupid? I studied so hard for this." So if we can really teach ourselves, how to deviate from that harsh and judgmental path, when we personally experience [sic] suffering, we can start to treat ourselves better like a friend. So we can really start to relate to ourselves in the way we relate to a close friend.



Amanda Reavey 20:35

I feel like you were sitting in my last therapy session.



Karen Tang 20:40

[Laughs]



Amanda Reavey 20:40

Geez, we're having heard this before? Were you there? Are you sure you weren't?



Karen Tang 20:48

Oh, I'm so glad to hear that. Self-compassion and things like this are, like, spoken about a lot more nowadays.



Amanda Reavey 20:57

Yeah, for sure. But yeah, like this, I love this self-compassion is like how to better – more, relate to ourselves, but also, like, having self-awareness, being vulnerable, being open, being okay that we can have – being accepting that we have these core emotions of, you know, anger and sadness and frustration, or whatever. That we actually oftentimes cover up with, like, shame and guilt and anxiety. So I love that, like, getting past that to being okay with feeling our feelings, you know?



Karen Tang 21:41

Yeah, absolutely. I think you nailed it right there. Like, I don't know if you've heard of the phrase, "If you resist, it persists." So meaning, the more you push away those negative emotions, the more you'll feel anger or sadness or guilt or shame. So really self-compassion is about embracing those really yucky and gross emotions, and then really feeling them. Because honestly, that's really part of the human experience. Right?



Amanda Reavey 22:09

Right. Like, like we're human, like embrace your humanity. This is what it's all about. Yeah, you are totally in my last therapy session.



Karen Tang 22:21

[Laughs] I aspire to be a psychologist. So, I'm really glad I'm getting there.



Amanda Reavey 22:27

But speaking of meditation; so I went to a Buddhist university for my master's program. So when I think of mindfulness, and it's cousin, meditation, I have a very strict, you know,

almost stereotypical, religious view of it. So for example, sitting on a cushion, you know, or in some Buddhist Zen meditation before you sit on the cushion, you bow to the cushion to show that you're present. Then you sit on the cushion, you put your hands on your thighs, eyes closed, focusing on the breath and not holding on to the breath, or when a thought comes, you let it go, you don't cling to it, because clinging results in suffering. So for those of us who are not Buddhist and don't want to be – not that that's a bad thing, I'm just you know, like, sometimes we have these kind of stereotypes about what meditation is. So what could meditation then look like? Why should we practice it? Like, how do we practice it, I guess? Especially if we take it out of the religious and into the secular?

K

Karen Tang 23:35

So I think your perception of what meditation is like actually isn't that uncommon. Like, that's really the stereotypical image of it. I think we've often sold the idea that you can only meditate at a meditation retreat, that you can only practice meditation with a trained individual to guide you, and I find that not true, especially with the proliferation of technology, including mobile apps. This allows you to really bring the meditation to you and your space in a place where you're really comfortable with. So for example, you can now use apps such as Headspace to really practice either guided meditations – so, guided meditations are where a teacher might walk you through the steps – or an unguided meditation where you do that alone and no one is walking you through this step. And so I think, I guess, with our day and age, we have so many different apps and tools that are actually available to us and that we can really bring meditation and mindfulness to your space and the place that you're really comfortable with.



Amanda Reavey 24:56

Yeah, just for listeners, I will have a link on our website, [www.stereotype.life](http://www.stereotype.life), with a link to the Headspace app if that's something that you're interested in checking out. So, my next question is: How can mindfulness and meditation lead to better engagement and studying and working within the academy?

K

Karen Tang 25:24

This is actually a very good question. So there is quite the abundance of research actually highlighting the benefits of engaging in mindfulness and/or meditation. And so a recent University of Cambridge study found that practicing mindfulness helps build resilience in students, and these are students in both undergrad and graduate degrees. So the study, which involved over 600 students, found that the introduction of an eight-week

mindfulness course, which included meditation, in UK universities could actually help prevent mental illness and boost student well-being. And they found that mindfulness could be considered a preventative coping strategy. As for more meditation-specific research, another study found that meditation-based stress management practices actually reduce stress and enhance forgiveness among college undergraduates. So this was similar to another study that examined nursing students in Korea, and found that a meditation-based stress-coping program reduced levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. So in sum, this is honestly just a really small snapshot of the plethora of benefits for mindfulness and meditation for those in academia and beyond. There's also research on cancer patients and chronic pain populations, as well as the general population. So mindfulness and meditation can not only improve psychological and physical symptoms through relaxation, but can also decrease levels of anxiety and depression, improve resistance to stress, and promote effective coping skills by approaching the individual's problem for a different point of view, and changing the way you're thinking about the source of stress.



Amanda Reavey 27:35

Yeah, so that's great, but, like, we're busy people, right? And, as you were saying earlier, nowadays, students have to have nearly full-time jobs in order to be able to go to school and afford school, and then they also have to have time to study. What advice can we give for people or for students who say that they don't have time?



Karen Tang 28:07

Right. So this is something I hear a lot. And this is something I also say a lot as a busy student. So, I know that as students, we're often so busy juggling classwork, part-time jobs, volunteering, other activities, what have you, especially if you're a grad student, you're also expected to juggle research, TA-ships, mentoring, and supervising students. So my advice to you would be to find self-care strategies that work best for you. It can be something that doesn't take too much time, like a quick meditation or a self-compassion break, or maybe reading a book on public transportation during your morning commute. So honestly, even plugging in some music and having a spontaneous dance party might be self care to you. Or if you're really interested in trying something in the mindfulness meditation realm, you can really give the body scan technique a try. So the body scan technique, it's – you essentially perform a mental scan from the top of your head to the end of your toes. So imagine a photocopier light slowly moving over your body, and then you would bring attention to any discomfort, sensations, or aches that exist. This type of meditation really syncs your body and mind together, and, honestly, it doesn't need to take more than five minutes. Alternatively, you can also try the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding

exercise, which I personally really enjoy. So, to do this, you need to really pay attention to your breathing, and you want to take slow, deep, and long breaths, just like in meditation, to give you a much more calmer state. So once you find your breath, you can go ahead and help ground yourself. So the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise works by having, or acknowledging five things you can see around you. So it could be a pen, a desk, a tree. Four is acknowledging four things you can touch around you. There could be your pillow, your hair. Three, you can acknowledge three things you hear, so that could be any external sound. So it might be birds chirping around, or your stomach growling because you're hungry. And then, Two, acknowledging two things you can smell. So maybe it's that fresh, new book smell that you got – that you got a new book from the library – or that that lasagna you had for lunch, you can still smell that lingering. And then, One, acknowledging one thing you can taste. So, for example, what does the inside of your mouth taste like? Was it that lasagna you had for lunch? So the strategy can be really useful when you're feeling particularly anxious or overwhelmed. So personally, I found that when I was on that verge of a panic attack, I personally used this to really center myself and get to acknowledge my surroundings. And so I think in sum, there's so many different strategies that can really work for each individual person. And so, I believe that self-care strategies really need to be tailored to who you are as an individual. So these are tools that are in your self-care toolkit that should be personalized to you. And so, finding those specific strategies that work for you is going to be really vital in ensuring you have a really good mental health and physical health well-being.



Amanda Reavey 32:05

Cool. The one that I like that I'm thinking of now is the 4-4-4, where you – it's like the breathing one, where you breathe in for four counts, hold it for four counts, and then breathe out for four counts. And then you do that four times. And that helps me, like, with when I feel like I'm gonna have – I have panic attacks, so when I feel like I'm gonna have one, I tried to do that. I sometimes forget because I'm in the middle of it and, like, can't, but when I remember, that's my favorite one.



Karen Tang 32:41

That's awesome. I've heard of it, but actually, I've never tried it when I'm on like the verge of a panic attack. So I'll have to give that a try.



Amanda Reavey 32:48

Yeah. Any last tips, tricks, things that we wish students would do or professors would do

for students?



Karen Tang 33:04

I think just hoping that with COVID and everything we start embracing a new normal of really ensuring mental health and well-being is a priority in our school systems and in higher education. I think the pandemic has highlighted major gaps in our current system that we could really start to address, and I think we're slowly moving towards – I guess we're slowly moving towards a new goal of hopefully considering mental health and well-being to be something that's really important. And hopefully we start seeing more open dialogue towards this, including, not just in students, but also in faculty and staff, and overall, the institution.



Amanda Reavey 34:00

Yeah, like, learning that it's important to prioritize it and to have these discussions and to – and by having the discussions, we destigmatize it, right? So, I think that's great. Thank you so much for doing this interview, it was great. I feel like you've given us a lot of tools that students and, actually, professors can use in terms of creating their self-care toolkit, modeling self care. Yeah, thank you.



Karen Tang 34:35

Thank you for having me.



Amanda Reavey 34:37

Alright, have a good one. Thank you for listening to this week's episode of Stereotype Life. If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review on iTunes and consider supporting us at [www.stereotype.life/donate](http://www.stereotype.life/donate). Lastly, this episode transcript was created by Frankie Martinez, and the music titled "Fresh-Fallen Snow" was created by Chris Hogan. We are always looking for more team members, so if you're interested, please contact us via our website. Until next time, have a good one. Bye!