

The LifeSpeak Podcast



HOST *Marianne Wisenthal*

Marianne Wisenthal is Director of Content at LifeSpeak and the host of the LifeSpeak Podcast – which airs new episodes on the 15th of each month.

She's a writer, producer, and communications and content strategy ninja with 15+ years of experience creating original editorial for digital, print, and broadcast clients.



GUEST *Lisa Pender*

Lisa Pender is a passionate Digital Wellness educator and speaker, and is the founder of [Digitally Well](#). She works with businesses and post-secondary institutions to provide impactful workshops, webinars, and consultations on the intersection of digital well-being and performance. Lisa is a sociology professor at Mohawk College and has been teaching in higher education for over fourteen years. She holds a Master of Arts degree from the University of Waterloo, a B.A. from McMaster University, achieved her Digital Wellness Educator certification from the Digital Wellness Institute, and completed the “Mindfulness in Modern Society” certificate from McMaster University. Lisa is also a figure skating coach of 25 years who lives, volunteers, and works in the Hamilton, Ontario area.

Connect with Lisa through her [website](#), [Instagram](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

VOICEOVER: *This is LifeSpeak, a podcast about wellbeing, mental health and building resilience through knowledge. Here's Marianne Wisenthal.*

MARIANNE: I'm speaking today with Lisa Pender, a certified digital wellness educator. Lisa is the founder of digitally well, a corporate training provider that offers wellness strategies to improve personal, professional, and academic performance. She's certified through the digital wellness institute, has a certificate in mindfulness in modern society from McMaster University, and she teaches sociology at the faculty of Liberal Studies at Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Lisa, welcome to the LifeSpeak podcast.

LISA PENDER: Hello, thank you for having me.

MARIANNE: We talk about mental wellness, physical wellness. What exactly is digital wellness?

LISA PENDER: Yeah, digital wellness is all about maintaining our health and wellbeing in relation to technology. So it's about using technology in a way that is sustainable over time, so we can achieve a state of digital wellness when we take advantage of all the benefits of technology while avoiding any associated harms. And the increase in screen time and the reliance and the dependency on technology that we see today is at an all time high. And for some, this has taken a really very real toll on their wellbeing, with almost half of us reporting that we're concerned about the impact of technology on our health. And rightly so. Digital wellness really brings awareness as to how technology impacts us on a bunch of different dimensions, including our mental and physical health, communication, our relationships, productivity, among others. And actually, you just mentioned some of those dimensions as well. I'm sure you've seen in your day a wellness wheel or two. Do you know what I'm talking about? Those colorful representations of holistic health. Right. It's an integration usually of anywhere from five to eight dimensions of wellness, including your intellectual, your spiritual, your emotional, just like the ones you mentioned in the opening. And the whole point, really, of that wellness wheel is to illustrate wellness as holistic. And I argue that we cannot talk about personal health and wellbeing in the 21st century without talking digital wellness. So I really encourage people to think of how they can kind of expand their thinking of that wellness wheel to include the digital.

MARIANNE: The importance of digital wellness is still relatively new in the health and wellness space. Why? Was this something that you were drawn to?

LISA PENDER: Yeah, I mean, it's definitely new. It stems from an intersection of the fields of positive media psychology and sociology and media studies. So it's very interdisciplinary. And how I fell into it was a bit of a perfect storm. As with many things in life, it was a product of timing. So it was a few things, really. It came during the first few months of lockdown, during the pandemic. And I personally was really just trying to navigate my own challenges that I was experiencing with the transition to remote work. And if you know me, I'm a person who really feeds off the energy of others. So the people in the environment of the college is very rich in that respect, and it really fills my cup, so to speak. So it was very difficult. It was a very difficult time for me, personally, to be isolated in that respect. And I was feeling burnt out, zoom, fatigue, and just really lacking that connection. And then the second part of it, it had to do with my students. And I had already started to see a shift with incoming first year students into the college in terms of the soft skills that they were kind of lacking in order to be a successful student. And frankly, they were all related to technology. They were struggling in terms of how to manage their time, how to focus, how to concentrate in class. And the thing is, they knew it, and they recognized that they needed help in these areas, and they were really looking for solutions. And so, of course, over the pandemic, they were inundated with all the same problems I was. So I had actually heard somebody speak at a continuing ed seminar and talked about digital wellness and really kind of it put all these pieces together for me. And so I started doing talks for students and staff, and it has really kind of snowballed from there. And the thing about technology is that we teach technical skills, but we don't really teach the soft skills related to it. And I really recognized that there was a gap there, and there had to be a better way. So once I started learning more about digital wellness, I realized that what was helping students was actually helping me as well. Because that's the great thing about digital wellness, is that it really transfers into different roles and facets of life.

MARIANNE: How has the pandemic really affected our relationship with technology? Because we're suddenly using it even more than we were before, and it's hard to imagine that was even possible. But now it's kind of taken over every aspect of our lives because we've needed it.

LISA PENDER: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we have certainly come to rely on it more than we ever did previously. That's evident in the fact that our screen time has increased dramatically during the pandemic and after. And that's because we had to in order to socialize, to work, even educate

ourselves and our kids. And I know some parents now are grappling with how to cut back. They recognize their kids are consuming too much media and are looking for ways to reduce it to prepandemic levels. And I think technology ultimately altered not only how much we consume, but how we consume it. I know some seniors now that are a lot more digitally savvy than they were pre pandemic, because technology became their lifeline with their families, and they had to learn how to use it, because that was the only way they could see them. So for others, they're avid online shoppers now than they were before. And I have colleagues who would never have dreamt of teaching an online course and ultimately became believers in the value of online and hybrid education. So, you know, although each individual's relationship with technology is very subjective, I think ultimately it really pushed some people outside their comfort zone and now they've adopted. They're kind of choosing what is right for them moving forward. We are seeing that there are many workers who want to continue some form of hybrid or remote work. We are seeing students that want to continue online or hybrid classes. But honestly, I think the Pandemic just accelerated the adoption of technology that was bound to happen ultimately anyways. And now people are kind of picking and choosing what is right for them moving forward and it's just kind of giving people more options.

MARIANNE: You offer digital training for companies and community groups. What are you hearing from organizations about the challenges they are facing around technology?

LISA PENDER: Yeah, the workplace is undergoing significant changes and as a result, there are a number of challenges in the workplace. There is high turnover. This notion of employees quiet quitting now. And it's probably no surprise to hear that employees mental and physical health are really at the forefront of everyone's agenda and rightly so. I think the Pandemic brought such profound change to the way we live our lives and it gave us this rare opportunity to sort of assess and evaluate what is important in life. And as a result, there's been a bit of a shift where employees are putting family first and work second and reprioritizing. And for some, we're seeing that that means that they want to continue working remotely or hybrid or for others, it means fully returning to the office. So with that in mind, we have to navigate this new world of work. And the challenges that they are facing around technology are things like how do they ensure their employees are managing the effects of digital overload or distraction and burnout? And how do they keep their employees connected from a distance

and foster team, collaboration and communication in a digital space? How do they ensure that their company's corporate values are expressed in a digital workplace? Even questions surrounding how to maximize the time employees do spend together in the event that they return to work in a hybrid fashion or remotely. So, you know, it's an interesting question because there is a bit of a disconnect right now because one of the reasons that employees or employers rather want their employees to come back to the workplace physically is because some don't have full confidence that employees are as productive at home as they perhaps could be at the office. But the research really doesn't support this. And I have spoken with a number of employees in different sectors and believe me when I say they are not napping in the afternoon. In fact, many are working overtime because they want to prove themselves. They want to be seen. And really what this does is it just ends up fueling the hustle culture, right? Or what I would call the burnout culture. And it creates this pressure to be always on, which is just not sustainable for anybody. And so, for leaders, it's a bit of a shift in mindset. We're not evaluating workers now based on their nine to five presence in the office, but instead it's an outcomes based performance of the work that they do. So there is a bit of a mindset shift that has to happen there. And somehow I think we need to find that sweet spot where remote workers don't feel like they need to over compensate for not being there in person. And having said that, we have to remember as well that leaders are people too, right? And they are also experiencing the stress and pressures associated with this change.

MARIANNE: What does a digitally healthy workplace look like?

LISA PENDER: You know, I think a digitally healthy workplace, there's going to be a positive digital culture, including a workplace that values employee physical health and mental wellness. It's a place that has healthy boundaries surrounding the expectations for things like responding to messages after hours and respecting people's personal time. It's a place where people's preference for communication is clearly stated and understood and agreed upon among team members. It's a place where remote workers are going to feel a sense of connection and purpose to their work, even though they may not be physically present in the office. It's a psychologically safe workplace where employees feel included and respected online, where they feel safe to speak up and to ask questions and state their opinion without fear of being reprimanded in a digital space where they feel represented as well. And it's a workplace where really digital wellness strategies are going to

become kind of integrated into aspects of people's work day so that they don't experience the mental and physical impacts of technology. So, for instance, we're appropriate, let's allow employees to turn off their cameras during meetings where breaks are going to be prioritized and viewed as important because they energize and invigorate their workers. It might be a workplace where we limit how many hours a person spends on zoom in a day because we understand that zoom fatigue is in fact real. So there's lots of different dimensions there. But those would be my suggestion. That's how I view the workplace. A digitally well workplace.

MARIANNE: How can employees take charge of their own digital wellness in a workplace that maybe doesn't really encourage that? Because not all workplaces do, and it can be especially hard for so many people working remotely.

LISA PENDER: Yeah, I mean, I just talked a little bit about team communication and I think it is very important that employees work together with their leaders and communicate what their preferences are, especially when it comes to expectations of working after hours, for instance. And leaders have a key role here, right? Because they are in a position of power and when it comes to advocating for their employees health and wellbeing, they're in a really privileged position to do that and they have to walk the walk and not just talk the talk, so to speak. Right. So despite what is agreed upon, if they don't respect the boundaries themselves or kind of model the behavior, that employees are going to continue to feel kind of pressured maybe to answer emails and text after hours, which can be very unhealthy. So it can definitely be challenging for employees to be in that kind of an environment. But on an individual level, people have to keep their wellness at the forefront of what they're doing. They say you have to take care of yourself before you can take care of others. And that's very true in this respect as well. So I think it just has to be made an individual priority and there's lots of small ways to achieve that on their own. Even just taking things like micro breaks. Recognizing that. Hey. I've been sitting on the computer for two or 3 hours. I need to get up and get moving. Recognizing again or asking permission again. Maybe just to turn off the camera during the next meeting so that maybe you can stretch while you're listening or just to kind of block those blue light emissions that can cause eye strain and things like that. Right, so just kind of these little measures that people can take during the workday to buffer the negative physical effects or even mental effects of technology.

MARIANNE: So it doesn't necessarily have to be major things that employees need to do. Speak to your manager, of course, some will and some won't be able to do that. But I like that idea of just sort of taking control of small things that you can do yourself, such as turning off the camera, taking a few minutes to stretch and get away from your desk, maybe deciding that you won't be answering emails after a certain time of day, you know, and trying to set that precedent. How can we recognize that technology may be impacting us negatively and that we need to do something about it?

LISA PENDER: Yeah, one of the mindset strategies that is very useful for me comes from Dr. Shimmy Kang and she wrote a book called The Tech Solution and she uses the analogy of a food diet basically. And she says we consume tech the same way we consume food and we can consume food that is healthy and nourishing and AIDS in our overall health and wellbeing, or we can consume junk food like things that are high in sugar or sodium or trans fats and it leaves us feeling generally unwell or depleted if not consumed in moderation. So technology basically works the same way. So in a sense, it's a digital diet and we can consume junk tech or healthy tech. And junk tech has a negative emotional and really physical effect on the body. And we can often identify junk tech because it starts to trigger that stress response in our body known as the fight or flight, so leaving us kind of anxious or nervous or jittery. This could be caused by something as simple as doom scrolling late at night when you're going through your newsfeed and you're kind of reading these headlines over and over again, and it just starts affecting you in a negative way. And healthy tech, on the other hand, is probably easier to imagine here because it leaves us feeling inspired, and we can recognize it easily because it makes us feel better emotionally, physically, socially. It fuels us, right. It adds meaning or it adds purpose to our lives. And so, as with food, kind of anything in moderation is probably fine. You just have to be self aware and check in regularly with yourself to kind of feel like where you're at. And we have to remember this changes day to day. Just like some days we're more hungry than others, some days we can tolerate technology more than others. And so that's kind of a mindset that I use to help decide kind of when healthy tech sometimes starts moving into that junk tech realm. Right. But it's all about checking in with yourself and figuring out where you're at.

MARIANNE: So maybe throughout the day, ask yourself if you're feeling anxious or you're feeling angry. Is this related at all to maybe my use of technology right now?

LISA PENDER: Yep, absolutely.

MARIANNE: We're always reading, oh, just turn off your screen for a period of the day, put your phone in a drawer. But it's really hard to do that.

LISA PENDER: It is. Right. They're designed that way. And so that's why it just really kind of becomes about self awareness and using text in a way that is intentional and purposeful and not just sort of passively answering to the call of a notification as soon as it comes in. Right. It's about knowing and using tech purposefully. That's a big part of digital wellness. Yeah.

MARIANNE: Can you talk a little bit more about that? Because I know you've said it isn't about being anti tech or even cutting back on consumption, but as you just said, but using tech in a more intentional and purposeful way, can you talk a little bit more about how we would do that?

LISA PENDER: Yeah, I mean, it's not about being anti tech at all. The aim isn't to tell anyone they need to cut it out or to cut back even on consumption, because for many knowledge workers out there, cutting back on screens is not an option you and I included. So, you know, one of the great things about digital wellness is that it recognizes the benefits of technology. So it's not about cutting it out. It's not saying that video games are bad. It's not saying you need to get off social media. That's not the purpose. The purpose is to be mindful of how you interact with technology and how it makes you feel. So digital wellness really emphasizes an intentional approach to technology use. And just to give you an example here of how you can do that, I just said the aim is not to cut out social media, for instance, but you might want to ask yourself, how many social media platforms do I really need to be on and for what reason? Right? How do they make me feel? And can you even keep up with them all? And you might find that when you start asking yourself these questions, you might find that, you know what, I don't think I really need to be on all of these platforms. Or maybe this one's not right for me right now because it doesn't serve a purpose. So it's just really about kind of asking those questions.

MARIANNE: How do you maintain your own digital wellness?

LISA PENDER: It's ongoing, for sure. Digital wellness is not a one and done. It's something that needs to be worked on continually to achieve. But I do it in so many different ways because now I'm so much more aware of the effects of

technology on us. I really try to exercise the intentional versus passive use approach, and there's a lot of ways I achieve that. So for instance, when I'm working, I don't keep my inbox open because I don't want to succumb to the distracting ping of incoming emails when I'm working. So I intentionally choose specific times in my day to answer emails. Mindfulness is a key strategy for me when I am overwhelmed or feeling the effects of technology. I practice things like deep breathing journaling, or typically take a walk outside without my phone just to sort of reconnect with my surroundings and allow my senses to kind of absorb the scenery, if you will. And now that I'm more aware of the physical effects of technology, I do take micro breaks much more often than I ever used to in order to kind of stretch and move and get outside. I limit my social media to only apps that really resonate with me and that served me a particular purpose. I hope none of my Facebook or IG friends are listening, but I'm not afraid to unfriend or amuse stories of people who maybe are not resonating well with my vibe. And I'm fully aware, for instance, that my phone is a big reason why I lie awake staring at the ceiling at night. So I do little things like utilize bedtime mode, which turns my phone to grayscale so that it's less appealing in the hours leading up to bedtime and it allows me to get to sleep. You know, there are so many more things I do. I also like to digital declutter. I want to hear about that. I love that it sounds strange, but I have a very clean and organized digital space. I have folders for everything. I have a very clean in box. You know that feeling you get after you clean your house? You can get that after you do a digital declutter. And a messy house, as you know, it leaves you feeling stressed and it leaves you feeling anxious, and a digital space can actually do the same. So I like to have a nice, tidy, clean, organized digital space. Honestly, there's so many more. I could go on and on talk.

MARIANNE: About multitasking because you say it's not as productive as we all seem to think it is, but we're all doing it anyway. How can we get rid of that habit?

LISA PENDER: Yeah, I mean, there was a time when being busy meant or equated to being productive. And it's a bit of an outdated way of thinking. Being busy really just stresses us out. It increases our error rates, and it really significantly interferes with our ability to process information, and it can lead to burnout. So we know now that studies tell us that doing one thing at a time is infinitely more productive than multitasking is. The more accurate term is actually continuous partial attention. Some people call it task switching. And when

we think of it that way, we realize that our brains are actually not like light switches. You can't just kind of turn and go back and forth on tasks that are cognitively demanding. And that is due to something called attention residue, which is a term that's coined by Sophie Leroy, and she basically talks, you know, about what happens with your brain when you move from task A to task B. And what happens is your attention becomes fragmented and kind of bits of your brain are actually still left on the original task, even though you've switched over to the next one. And so you can kind of start to visualize why errors get made and mistakes happen due to multitasking. So, yeah, it's really not a treasured skill anymore.

MARIANNE: Apps and algorithms are designed to make tech more and more addictive. What do we need to know about this and what can we do about it?

LISA PENDER: Yeah, I mean, like I said, they are really addictive by design. It is the model with which they are built. They are built for profit, which means that they want to capture our attention. And, I mean, there's lots of ways they do this. We think of endless scrolling feeds. We think about autoplay. When Netflix actually introduced autoplay. It just Skyrocketed, right? Because people were just they started bingeing, right? Bingeing was not a thing a few years ago until Autoplay started happening. So they are built by design. And I truly feel that our biggest weapon against that is knowledge and just simply recognizing that, hey, when you get into those endless scrolling behaviors, you know, with digital wellness, you do come to recognize it very, very quickly, like, oh, I'm getting trapped in this. And that's kind of where mindfulness comes in, because mindfulness is a really important strategy for digital wellness. And really what it does is it creates that sense of awareness that being in the moment, that is so important, when you get sucked in, right, to those algorithms and things that keep you kind of coming back for more.

MARIANNE: You're a parent, I'm a parent. We have children who consume a lot of digital content. How can we teach our children to be more digitally mindful? And when can we start doing that? At what age?

LISA PENDER: Digital wellness can start from a really young age. Arguably when babies are as young as a few months old, that's when they're learning about the world around them, and they learn by watching, which is why we kind of want to keep our digital use in check around young kids. Kids love to

role models, so being attentive to our children and putting the phone away when we interact with them sends them a very important message. And it's not just for babies, it's with tweens and teens. We can't expect them to get off screens if we don't model the same behavior. So I think we need to let them know why we always have our phone in our hands. Sometimes I think we need to communicate that we use devices for different reasons. Kids use it for entertainment, but they have to understand that adults aren't always using it for entertainment. So sometimes it's just as simple as communicating. Hey, mom is just answering a few emails for work and I'm going to be done in ten minutes. Because kids are fighting for our attention, right? And they're competing with our phones. So it's important they understand sometimes that adults are using phones for different reasons than kids and that it is necessary. And when it comes to digital wellness with the family, I'm a big one for making sure we choose screen time over screen time. Just like there are recommended screen time limits for adults, there are recommended hours for daily physical activity. And we have to make sure kids get outside and they get moving and they explore their environments and interact with others socially and really balance the time that they have on tech with a healthy dose of outdoor time. And you know what? Whenever I get the chance to kind of tell parents this, I say, delay, delay, delay. We need to remember the average age, actually, that a child gets a cell phone these days is around ten. Even the last statistic that I read, even 20% of eight year olds have a smartphone, and that's how old my son is now who does not have one. And things like Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, they all have a minimum age of 13 to be on the app. And so what is happening here is that kids are getting exposed to things too early, right? And they're not equipped yet in life to deal with the magnitude of things that they will see in here and the emotions that they're going to experience as a result, right? Once you see something, you can't unsee it. So delay when you can and introduce mindfully. Ask them when you are introducing a new technology, what are the challenges that may come with it. Have that conversation, talk to them about how we're going to handle challenges when they come up and normalize those conversations as they grow up so that they are more likely to come to you later when they hear or see something online that's troublesome. So I think we just have to involve kids and we have to ask those questions and sort of be a trusted source. That's all part of digital wellness.

MARIANNE: These are very challenging times. We're living in Pandemic, being locked up at home for long periods, being required to be online, and you're helping people make digital wellness a priority. What keeps you feeling hopeful and optimistic?

LISA PENDER: My son, because he is eight, and he reminds me every day of the importance of being curious and kind of looking at the world through a lens of discovery and curiosity. And I'm hopeful and optimistic that we're going to build a future for his generation where technology is a little bit more human centric than it is presently. And what I mean by that is that right now, technology has changed and evolved so rapidly that society is sort of lagging behind a bit, and we're trying to kind of keep up and find solutions to problems after the fact. So, for example, when it comes to artificial intelligence and, you know, the documentary Coded Bias brought to the forefront issues of racial bias with facial recognition programs, you know, these biases are embedded into these algorithms, right? Because the people who are creating them are passing on their own biases, whether they're conscious of it or not. So I'm hopeful that we are going to move into an era where humans are not an afterthought when it comes to technology, but rather technology is created with humans in mind. So that's the hope. And there's so much more awareness now of these issues around algorithms, around all of these challenges that we're seeing with technology. So hopefully we can create technology, like I said, with humans in mind.

MARIANNE: Lisa Pender, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

LISA PENDER: Absolutely. Thank you so much. It was great to be here.

VOICEOVER: *For more about this episode, go to [LifeSpeak.com](https://lifespeak.com) podcast.*