

**VIEW to the U transcribed**  
**Season 2, Women in Academia, Episode #9**  
**Professor Jennifer Stellar, Department of Psychology – U of T Mississauga**

[Theme music fades in and then out]

Jennifer Stellar (JS): Giving the same amount of attention, empirical attention, to the good side of human nature as the bad side, is something that I have devoted myself to. My name's Jennifer Stellar in the Psychology Department at University of Toronto Mississauga.

And I think we can learn a lot from how people are good, and how they feel compassion and gratitude, and feel empathy for others. So I think one of my goals is to work in that area and try and understand it with the same rigor that we've understood how we can be aggressive and antisocial and stereotype people and have prejudice. So that's sort of a broader goal of mine, and I think helping people realize the importance of these emotions is really important to me, because it's easy to sort of push them aside and think about when we're feeling angry or scared, those loom very large.

But I think what brings us happiness isn't just reducing the amount of fear and anger we feel, but actually adding these positive emotions, especially these ones that connect us and bind us to other people. That's sort of the broader impact.

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Carla DeMarco (CD): The Power of Positivity in People.

Starting off the new academic term in the spirit of optimism, today's guest on VIEW to the U spends her time examining the "good stuff of human nature." On this edition of the podcast, Professor Jennifer Stellar from the Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto Mississauga, discusses her program of research that touches on several areas, including how individuals and social groups thrive.

Her lab particularly focuses on the ways in which various positive emotions, such as compassion, awe, empathy and gratitude can improve an individual's physical health, wellbeing and enhance relationships, as well as encourage morality and prosocial behaviors.

With this fresh academic term just starting up, we also touch on how students might be fostering their own sense of awe with their return to the classroom and exploring new concepts or ideas, and the importance of taking time out from our busy lives to ignite that sense of awe and appreciation for the beauty in the world around us, something that Jenny practices herself when she can for

its benefits to wellbeing. With this second season focused on women in academia, Jenny imparts some advice for women embarking on an academic career, and the importance of making connections with potential mentors.

Hello and welcome to VIEW to the U, an eye on UTM research. I'm Carla DeMarco at U of T Mississauga. VIEW to the U is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines, who will illuminate some of the inner workings of the science labs, and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

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Jennifer Stellar is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto Mississauga, and oversees the Health, Emotions and Altruism Laboratory, or HEAL. She did a BA in psychology and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, before earning her PhD in social personality psychology from the University of California, Berkeley, where she was also a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Personality and Social Research.

Her research has been funded by a number of agencies, including the Templeton Foundation in the US, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Canadian Foundation for Innovation.

JS: My name's Jennifer Stellar, in the Psychology Department at University of Toronto Mississauga, and my research broadly focuses on emotions. In particular, I look at a category of emotions which we call prosocial emotions, because they help promote altruistic cooperative behavior. Emotions like compassion, gratitude, awe. And I also study, more broadly, morality.

So why do we uphold these moral codes in societies, and how do they help us, again, sort of cooperate together when we live in groups. And to give you some examples, I've recently worked on a project looking at how art can elicit feelings of awe, and how that might promote wellbeing. I've been working with one of the local museums in Toronto, to have participants go into the museum and compare that to some other conditions where they're doing less exciting or interesting activities, and see if we can actually measure both psychological changes in wellbeing, but also changes for physical health. So immunity, changes in heart rate and other physiological measures that sort of tap into the biological side as well as the psychological.

CD: So if you were going to have a participant go into a museum, as an example, are they wired up to have...?

JS: In a lot of our studies, though not all of them, we have people provide saliva samples, which is a fancy way of saying we have them spit into tubes, and then we analyze it. We actually are getting that analyzed here at the University of

Toronto with another faculty in the Psychology Department, which is great. I think, actually, he's been on your podcast before, Loren Martin. So connection there. And then they do also wear ... In this case, they were wearing watches with little bands that was measuring the heart rate. But we can also do more sophisticated things where we're measuring all kinds of biological changes that are happening in your body. Through when we're doing that, we don't usually have people walking around, because it's got a lot of wires. So yeah, we try to get both this biology and this psychology side of whatever we're measuring.

CD: Are the saliva samples taken before and after, or just?

JS: Exactly. So we collect the saliva before as sort of a baseline, sort of how you come in, and then we'll do something to you. So we might have you go into a museum, we might put you through a stress test. In some of my other studies I've done that. And then we're going to look at how markers of inflammation, in particular, which are really important for immunity, how those might change.

CD: And are they completing any kind of diary...?

JS: Yeah, so they're doing surveys. We usually have them do those before. We'll get some demographic information about them, just so we know a little more about them, their age and gender and ethnicity, maybe some personality measures. And then afterwards we'll also look at things like satisfaction with life, so how good do they feel about their lives in this moment? What are their emotions? Are they feeling stressed? Are they feeling awe? Are they feeling compassion or gratitude? As well as other measures, we look at things like empathy humility, all kinds of sort of good stuff, I call it. The good stuff of human nature.

CD: And so far you have seen though then some sort of connection with this feeling of awe?

JS: So the physiological measures take a lot of time to work through, and same with the sort of saliva measures, so we're still analyzing those. But we are seeing some benefits for stress, and we are seeing that people are responding to those, the art museum, the exhibits that they're going to, in a way that seems to be good for their health, or their wellbeing, I should say, actually. We don't know about their health yet. So stay tuned, and I'll certainly update you once we get those results in.

CD: Okay. Great. And so I watched your TED talk, and we're going to link to that on our Soundcloud page. But I just wondered, in it you define awe by its synonyms, which you said wonder and amazement, and that we feel awe when we encounter something vast and grand that challenges our world view and makes us feel connected with others around us. And so I realized that you are referring to things like the art museum, or the beautiful night sky and things like that. But I'm just wondering, and I guess it's because it's September and new students are

coming onto campus, if you can extend that to those pursuing, maybe, an academic program, and who may be experiencing their own sort of eureka moments, or that their brain is really starting to turn on by some new concepts?

JS: Sure. It's a great question, and we've done studies, we call them daily diary studies, where we ask people to report on the awe that they're feeling, or some kind of awe experience each day. Now, people don't have awe experiences every day.

But the sample we used was an undergraduate sample, and one of the interesting things we found that was a recurring theme, was going to class and learning about something that sort of challenged your world view. I think someone gave us an example of learning that the universe is constantly expanding. And just sort of for them, it hit them in the right way where it changed how they saw the world. And I think that classes, because they're teaching us new information, are precisely one of those opportunities for us to have our minds sort of expanded and challenge the way we see things. And that can give rise to awe. So the hope would be that throughout the semester, the classes you're taking are providing some awe experiences for you.

CD: And you also mentioned in that same TED talk that you aimed to incorporate more opportunities for awe in your own everyday life, because you see it as an essential to your mental and physical health. And so I just wondered if you could give us a couple of ways that you're ... what you're doing to ignite that spark of awe in your life?

JS: Yes, so I try to take my own advice as a researcher. And for me ... You mentioned fall, I love fall, because it's beautiful and with all the maple trees around Toronto, especially the Mississauga campus. Even just a few ... You know, short minute walk outside, or there's a couple trees I really like on campus, and in around Toronto area. And I'll go look at them, especially when the leaves are changing, things like that. I think when we're busy and we're working, we think we don't have time to do those kind of activities. It feels like we're actually being bad, right? We're supposed to be working, and we're taking time to go for a walk, which is fun and leisurely and great for us.

But I really think these things are important for health and wellbeing, and they don't have to be these huge experiences where you travel to Egypt and see the pyramids. You can have a place out in nature that you like. Or even you can go online and see some photos of great places to travel in the world, and feel that sense of awe in your room or outside, nearby. And so I think any way you can build those is great. Going to concerts, going to art exhibits, try and build those in. One, because they're fun. But two, because they may actually provide some benefits for your health and wellbeing, and that's sort of what we're trying to uncover.

CD: Yeah. And when you take these walks ... I'm just curious, because I know I've fallen into this bad habit of I have to have some music playing, or I'm listening to a podcast or something. Do you recommend ... If you're going to go out in nature, that you just sort of go without being connected to anything, so you can really observe what's happening around you, or ...

JS: That's certainly one way to do it, and I think that would be great. I also find, for me though, that music does help me feel awe. And so if you can augment the visual experience with something auditory, with music, I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. What I think we want to do is not have our phones out and be texting or checking our email. Because then we're not even really looking around and realizing where we are. So I think you're right, to the extent that we want to be disconnected from things that are going to stress us out and take us out of the environment. We don't want to do that. But if there are things that augment it for you, like music, then by all means, I would say go for it.

CD: I am curious, how did you get into this line of work in the first place? Or how did this area of research become of interest do you?

JS: So the broad area of interest that I have in sort of prosocial emotions is a question that I've always had. I was an anthropology major and a psychology major, and I felt like one of the common themes that kept coming up was are humans good or bad? Are we evil or virtuous? And obviously it's a complex question, and probably are both, but a lot of the work that I was seeing in my evolutionary psychology classes, or just evolution classes in anthropology, were sort of like "We're selfish. We're designed to look out for our own needs." But then you have all this great work showing the amazing connections people feel with each other, the bond that a mother has with their child. And I felt like we needed more research on the good side. And I've always been interested in emotions, and so these emotions, to me, are fascinating, because we do feel compassion, and we feel gratitude. And to me that's sort of one way we're designed to be good, we're designed to be good people. And so that broad question has always been interesting to me.

And then how I got to specific emotions is sort of more happenstance. So I started with compassion, because I was always interested in empathy. Part of that being good is our ability to empathize and understand what others are thinking. And did a lot of work on that to begin with, and then started getting interested in other emotions that might have sort of similar outcomes for promoting altruism and cooperation. And awe was one that didn't have very much research. Gratitude has been very popular, I felt like people are out and doing that work, but I didn't see as much work on awe. And my advisor got a grant to study it, so we really just started diving in in grad school, and I've carried that through here as a faculty member.

CD: And where did you go to grad school? I forget.

JS: Berkeley, so University of California, Berkeley.

CD: This might not be relevant at all, but I'm thinking there are researchers here in psychology at U of T Mississauga who are doing work in empathy. As you mentioned, Loren Martin, and also, I think, Tina Malti, more so related to adolescent. Do you do any sort of collaboration with them, or ...

JS: We've just started a little bit, so Loren and I are working through these saliva samples together on this project. And I'd love to work with him more in the future. And Tina and I have started ... We have very similar interests, though she focuses on children and I focus primarily on adults, so I would love to do some of those collaborations. And that was a big draw for me when I interviewed here, was seeing other colleagues that could be potential collaborators, and to build that intellectual community, which is great.

CD: It seems like a great common sense research cluster.

JS: Right, so our cluster is the Health and Wellbeing cluster. So I was a good fit for it, and because we have sort of a thematic cluster, we're not just social and personality psychology, we have sort of an idea of what specifically we want to study. We have more researchers, I think, doing sort of similar research, so when we have conversations we can more easily form collaborations than you might see in other psychology departments, yeah.

CD: I think you've touched on this quite a bit, but what do you feel is the biggest impact of your work?

JS: Yeah, so I think as a larger goal, giving the same amount of attention, empirical attention, to the good side of human nature as the bad side is something that I have devoted myself to. And I think we can learn a lot from how people are good and how they feel compassion and gratitude, and feel empathy for others. So I think one of my goals is to work in that area and try and understand it with the same rigor that we've understood how we can be aggressive and antisocial, and stereotype people and have prejudice. So that's sort of a broader goal of mine.

And I think helping people realize the importance of these emotions is really important to me, because it's easy to sort of push them aside and think about when we're feeling angry or scared. Those loom very large. But what I think what brings us happiness isn't just reducing the amount of fear and anger we feel, but actually adding these positive emotions, especially these ones that connect us and bind us to other people. So that's sort of the broader impact, I think.

CD: Sounds good to me.

JS: Yes. Long term goals.

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CD: Coming up: Women in Academia.  
Jenny offers words of advice for women looking to embark on a career in academia, emphasizing the importance of mentorship, and reaching out to others for support.

[theme music fades out]

CD: And so as I mentioned before, this season of VIEW to the U is focused on women in academia. And I wanted to open up this dialogue a little bit more, to include anything that could be related to this theme, that others might find inspiring. So either some challenges that you might have overcome, or if you've benefited from a particular mentor, or if you have words of encouragement for other young female academics or students who are just embarking on a career path, or any program of study.

JS: Yeah, so that's a lot of pieces to that question. So I chose to focus on thinking about giving advice for future academics, for women out there. And I think for me, one of the most useful things I tried to do ... maybe didn't do so well at the beginning, but have gotten better at, is identifying other women that could be role models, or could actually be mentors to me directly in my environment.

There's a lot of institutional knowledge from women who've gone through rising through the ranks of academia, and I think having a connection to them, building a connection and a network with them, is one of the best things that a young woman could do. So that would be something I would recommend. It can be intimidating to try and approach someone who's older and more established than you, but I always welcome women who come talk to me, and I would hope that women who have been in the field longer than me would have that same sort of mentality.

CD: Yeah. Do you find that because ... Before we were talking about psychology, there's quite a few female faculty members here, this is an area where it's easier to make those sort of connections, or create those networks?

JS: So we were talking about this a little earlier. I do think my specific cluster and psychology in general has sort of a more even proportion of men and women. And I think it does help. I think it makes it easier for new women to find places in the department. So we have a new woman coming to our cluster next year, and it makes it more welcoming. And so to the extent that something can be a end goal, I think the Psychology Department has done a great job at making this

a very welcoming environment, where I feel like I can just be myself, and I don't have to be a token women, and I don't have to speak for all women. But I can provide my opinion that's just mine, and I think that's sort of a lovely luxury to have.

I know all women don't have that. But I do think ... Just like my research, looking at people who are good as how we could be more like them, I think for me, this department is one that would be a good department for others to look to, to find that healthy balance and a welcoming environment.

CD: Well that seems like a very good note to end on. We're focusing on the positive. I just wanted to thank you so much for taking the time to tell me about your research today.

JS: Thank you for having me.

CD: I would like to thank everyone for listening to today's show.

I would like to thank my guest, Professor Jennifer Stellar, for coming in to speak about her work in the Department of Psychology at UTM.

Thank you for the Office of the Vice Principal, Research, for their support, and for everyone who has expressed their interest, or has helped to promote this podcast.

Please feel free to get in touch with me. My contact information is on our Soundcloud page, if you have feedback, or if there is someone from UTM that you'd like to see featured on VIEW to the U.

Lastly, and as always, thank you to the ever tuneful Tim Lane for his music and support.

Thank you!