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*Adapting to COVID-19: How Practicing Mindfulness Can
Improve Your Wellbeing*

September 21, 2020

Judy Bushnell - BCIT

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Territorial Acknowledgement

Judy Bushnell:

Thank you Duane.

Judy Bushnell:

Nice to see you all, virtually. I'm joining you today from the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh nations. And I'm really pleased to be here today to share a little bit about mindfulness and coping in these really difficult times. We need to take care of ourselves more than ever, so I'm glad that you could be here with us today.

Introduction

Judy Bushnell:

So my name is Judy Bushnell, and I'm a mindfulness teacher and I'm also a counselor at BCIT. And I've been working in post-secondary education for quite a long time, over 20 years now, which is amazing to me. And I've had lots of experience with working with students, and also bringing in my own self-care and coping. And mindfulness was very helpful to me in my career, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but I think I've drawn on those skills more now than I ever have.

Judy Bushnell:

So, for some of you I know this will be new information and some of you a little bit of review. I understand there're quite a few counselors, BC post-secondary counselors here. So, some of you may already be familiar with mindfulness and practice mindfulness yourselves but I'm really glad that I could share this information.

Judy Bushnell:

So I'll start with a little bit of an overview of today's session. And we'll start off talking a little bit about what mindfulness is, and then go into the benefits of mindfulness and how to cultivate mindfulness or mindful awareness. And I want to leave time for a guided practice, to invite those of you who are participating to do a little bit of mindfulness, because talking about mindfulness and telling you what it is, is not nearly as effective as practicing. We really get a experiential understanding of what mindfulness is through practice. So, that will be happening later. And then I also want to share some resources with you.

Where is My Mind?

Judy Bushnell:

So as we start, I'd like you to just take a moment to sort of check-in with yourself and notice where your mind is, where your attention is right now. So just take a moment and sort of get a sense of where your mind is at.

Judy Bushnell:

So, as human beings, we're quite good at mental time travel and our minds can be all sorts of places that are not here now. So as we did this brief exercise, and you can practice this throughout the day, just kind of stopping and noticing where your mind is at. We might notice that we're zoned out or spacing out. We might be daydreaming or imagining things, pleasant or unpleasant. Often we're thinking about the past, things that happened before, remembering. Or thinking about the future, things that may happen or things that may never happen. We're great at imagining. And we also may be focused on the present moment or the task at hand, and we are exactly, our attention is exactly where we are here now.

Mindfulness

Judy Bushnell:

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Judy Bushnell:

So, what mindfulness is. Mindfulness is the quality of awareness that arises when we pay attention to the present moment with an attitude of openness and curiosity, and a willingness to be with what is. So we're accepting the moment just as it is, which is sometimes easier said than done. But the good news is that we all have this ability. We all have this ability to come home to ourselves and find peace, even in the midst of stress and difficulty, even in the midst of COVID-19. We all have this ability to be mindful, and it can be of benefit in a number of ways.

Judy Bushnell:

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Judy Bushnell:

So of course, mindfulness isn't new, people have been practicing mindfulness for thousands of years. And you're probably, many of you are aware, that mindful awareness practices are found in many traditions including yoga (if you practice yoga), or martial arts (Tai Chi), Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Many religious traditions, maybe many ancient traditions practice. Mindful awareness is a practice, an important practice.

Judy Bushnell:

And over the last 30 years, Western psychology, finally catching on, is becoming interested in the benefits of mindfulness training. And it's now an empirically supported intervention for a variety of mental health issues.

Judy Bushnell:

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Benefits of Mindfulness

Judy Bushnell:

So what we know about the human mind is that the human mind is a wandering mind. And a wandering mind is often an unhappy mind. So about 10 years ago, a group of researchers at Harvard used a smartphone app to look into what their research subjects were thinking, what they were doing and what they were feeling at random points throughout their day. And what they discovered, was that people were thinking about something other than what is happening in the present moment about 47% of the time. Almost half the time, people were thinking about what was not happening. So, thinking about what happened in the past, thinking about what might happen in the future or what might never happen, rather than what they were actually engaged with.

Judy Bushnell:

And what they discovered was that mind wandering, or this sort of stimulus-independent thought, came with an emotional cost. And it tended to ... People reported that when their minds were wandering, they were less happy than when they were engaged with what they were doing. Even if what they were doing was fairly mundane, or fairly neutral, or maybe even slightly unpleasant. The mind wandering was associated with less happiness.

Judy Bushnell:

So, our mindfulness training is sometimes referred to as mental push-ups, because it strengthens our brains attention system.

Judy Bushnell:

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Judy Bushnell:

So, a number of benefits of mindfulness include improving our concentration and our working memory, which allows us to hold information and manipulate it in our mind. Very important for functioning and daily life, and really helpful for students, of course. It does tend to decrease our unhelpful mental chatter. So, as I mentioned, our minds can be all over the place, human beings can time travel mentally quite easily and fall into this without realizing it. So we can spend a lot of time worrying about what might happen. And certainly, this year there's been a lot of uncertainty in people's lives and that can create a lot of mental distress.

Judy Bushnell:

Also, we can think about things that happened in the past. And what we tend to remember, because our minds have a bit of a negativity bias, we don't always remember the highlight reel, it's more like the blooper reel or the things that went wrong. So, mindfulness can help cut back a little bit on the mental chatter, or at least we can notice when that's happening and come back to the present moment.

Judy Bushnell:

Mindfulness is also famously helpful for reducing stress. There are some studies showed that it can boost the immune system. It can promote greater emotional balance and resilience, so this is really important for all of us right now. And because the quality of awareness is open and very kind, it can also

... Practicing mindful awareness can help us cultivate positive qualities like kindness, compassion, joy, taking pleasure in the happiness of others, and also equanimity, so that sort of evenness, calm balance of mind. Even in the midst of stress and difficulty, we can feel stable and balanced.

Judy Bushnell:

And one of the reasons why I started practicing mindfulness regularly, was to help me cultivate a therapeutic presence with my clients, with students, that I was seeing in my work as a counselor. So another benefit of mindfulness, is that can really help to enhance relational presence and sense of connection which, again, is more important now, I think, than it ever has been.

Cultivating Mindful Awareness

Judy Bushnell:

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Judy Bushnell:

So how this works, is because our brain has the ability change and reorganize itself. With experience, we can change the brain. So, this is called neuroplasticity. You may have heard that word before. So, neuroplasticity is the ability of the brain to be modified by its own functioning. So, neurons that fire together, wire together. They connect. So when our brain cells communicate frequently, the connection between them strengthens. And the more we perform a certain task, for instance a mindful awareness practice, again and again, through repetition, the stronger that neural network becomes. And it makes the process, the communication between those neurons, more efficient over time. So this is how mindfulness can change our brain for the better, if we're practicing consistently.

Judy Bushnell:

Next slide.

Judy Bushnell:

So mindfulness, being aware of the present moment, with a quality of awareness, openness, kindness. It's a very simple concept but it takes effort and discipline to cultivate this quality. So, to change a state into a trait. And just as when we go to the gym, we might meet with a personal trainer and go for a session but if we're not doing the activity again and again we're not going to get the benefit. And it's true with mindfulness as well. So when we practice regularly, our brain can change and it can change for the better and we can start to enjoy some of those benefits.

Judy Bushnell:

But at first, we have to be really patient with ourselves. So there's a number of ways to cultivate mindful awareness, and the one that is probably most familiar to people is through meditation. And sometimes mindfulness is confused with meditation, or people use those words as one in the same. And a useful way to think about meditation is that it's a little bit like sports, it's a category of a particular activity. So there's many different kinds of sports and there's many different kinds of meditation. But one kind of meditation is mindfulness meditation, this helps to cultivate that quality of awareness. So as we practice over time, we can get better at it and better at bringing our attention back to the present moment with those qualities.

Judy Bushnell:

And for some people, they really enjoy meditation. I, myself, love meditation. But for some people, meditation's not for everyone. So, when I do the guided practice later on in this session, we'll do a little bit of mindfulness meditation in the guided practice. And it takes a while to sort of get the hang of it, learning any new activity. But if meditation isn't always for everyone, so over time people may get into it. But the good news is, if mindfulness meditation doesn't really fit for you, there are other ways to cultivate that quality of awareness and those benefits.

Judy Bushnell:

So, another way is by practicing relational mindfulness. And when we practice relational mindfulness, what we're doing is we're bringing the quality of awareness to the present moment; open, kind, curious attention, and we're bringing that to our interactions with other people. So we're listening with compassion, fully present with the person that we're listening to, and we're also speaking authentically from the heart. When we're listening or having a conversation, we're not so caught up in thinking about what we're going to say, that we're missing what the other person is saying. We're really bringing that full presence, with compassion, to the interaction and connection. And we can play with our children this way, there's many ways to practice this.

Judy Bushnell:

And for those of us who work with people closely in our daily lives, certainly BC post-secondary counselors in our work, we can be practicing relational mindfulness all day. So we can clock quite a few hours of mindfulness practice when we're with our students, and as instructors as well, and with our colleagues. So, if meditation isn't your thing, there's lots of other ways to practice.

Judy Bushnell:

Another way we can practice mindfulness is by bringing that quality of awareness to activities in daily life. So, this is another way we can be practicing mindfulness throughout the day, either in addition to a meditation practice or ... These are known more as informal mindfulness practices, and meditation's known as a formal mindfulness practice, but it all adds up. So activities in daily life, when we're washing the dishes for instance, we can be bringing the open, compassionate, curious attention to the experience of washing the dishes. So we can be hearing the sink filling with water, hearing the sounds, hearing the dishes bump up against each other, we can be smelling the soap suds, feeling the dishes, we can be feeling our body standing there in the moment. So, practicing while we're washing the dishes.

Judy Bushnell:

We can also bring mindfulness awareness to other activities like drinking our tea. We can notice the feeling of the cup in our hand, the warmth of the cup, the scent of the liquid (the beverage) and feeling the warmth of that. We can bring that attention to the experience of drinking. Or eating, really savoring the taste of our food, seeing the color, expressing gratitude for it, thinking about also where our food comes from. So we can include a little bit of gratitude practice in that activity as well.

Judy Bushnell:

One of the ways that I practice mindfulness when I was commuting to work, now of course I'm working from home, but when I was commuting to work every morning, I would do a little mindfulness practice while I was waiting for my bus. So, as I was standing at the bus stop, I'd be feeling my soles of my feet

making contact with the ground, I'd be noticing the sounds around me and then when I boarded the bus, if I was standing, again, I'd notice my body standing, I could hear the sounds around me. Or if I was seated sometimes, if I felt safe enough, I would close my eyes and just sort of be aware of my breath, the posture of my body.

Judy Bushnell:

So, there's many ways to practice in daily life. So, meditation, relational mindfulness, activities in daily life. If you don't currently have a regular mindfulness practice, I'd invite you to try a few of these different things and see what kind of fits for you. Because just like exercise, if we don't enjoy it, we probably won't do it. But if you find an activity that you enjoy, and the same goes for mindfulness practice, you're more likely to stick with it and get the benefits of it.

Judy Bushnell:

So, next slide.

Judy Bushnell:

So when we're practicing mindfulness, what we want to do is observe what's true in this moment. This moment right here, this frame of the movie. And we're noticing, right now, this moment is like this. So we're just tuning into what's true in this moment. And what we want to do, as best we can, is to greet all of our experience with what's known as a beginners mind. So, even if we're experiencing something that we've seen many times before or we've done many times before, we want to kind of bring fresh eyes to that experience if we can. And also that attitude is very important, of kind-allowing and compassionate curiosity. I think sometimes we're not always aware of how much the human mind just tends to, in its default mode, sort of noticing with a lot of judgment, evaluating, analyzing. But when we're able to step out of that, we get access to that mindful awareness, which is quite a different experience and very helpful.

Judy Bushnell:

And we can notice, also, that all our thoughts, emotions, sensations, whatever it is that we're experiencing, it will come and go naturally just like the weather. So we can imagine ourselves as the bright blue sky, and thoughts and feelings that come along in our awareness, they're like clouds in the sky. Some are very wispy and light, some are very stormy and dark, but they all come and go. And it's important to recognize sometimes that the experiences that we have, our thoughts, emotions; it's not personal. We often take our thoughts and feelings very personally and it's hard not to do this because this is all happening in our mind all the time. But when we practice mindfulness, one of the things that we may get a sense of is that we can observe our experience without becoming caught in it or lost in it.

Judy Bushnell:

So even if we're having really difficult thoughts or feelings in that moment, if we can be mindful, if we can be aware of what we're experiencing and step back from it a little bit and watch it as though it's a cloud passing by in the sky, we can see that that experience is not who we are. And all of those thoughts and feelings will come and go naturally.

Judy Bushnell:

Some thoughts may be helpful, and then we can act and choose to act on them. But a lot of thoughts that we have may not be helpful. And if we can distinguish between what our mental content is that's kind of helping us live our lives and live more in tune with our values and act on them, then we're able to have a much fuller, more meaningful life. Rather than getting caught and pushed around by our thoughts and emotions all the time. So that is a big benefit, and it helps to work skillfully with the human mind that we have, which can be tricky.

Judy Bushnell:

Next slide.

Guided Practice

Judy Bushnell:

So now I'd like to invite you to do a little bit of guided practice. And I'm just going to be aware of the time here. So, you're welcome to practice with your eyes open or closed, there's no better or worse way. As long as you feel comfortable, please do what feels comfortable to you. And if you'd rather not do the guided practice then that's completely fine as well.

Judy Bushnell:

But for those of you who'd like to practice a little bit to get a sense of mindfulness, I invite you to close your eyes (if that's comfortable for you), or you can keep them open. And just bring awareness to your body. Because the human mind can time travel so quickly and so well, it's helpful to bring awareness to our body, because our body's always here now. So we can just sort of sense into our body. And get a sense of your posture. And if you're seated, you can notice the feeling of your body making contact with the chair. And you can notice sensations of touch or pressure.

Judy Bushnell:

And just take a moment to just check-in with yourself now, and just notice what's true for you in this moment. So you may notice if there are any thoughts that are present. And, as we practice, we're not trying to get rid of any experiences or change them, we're simply being aware of what is. So we're noticing if thoughts are present, we can simply notice those thoughts and allow them to be there without getting too caught up in the story.

Judy Bushnell:

And I also invite you now to notice if there are any emotions that are present. And just making space for them. All experience is welcome just as it is, see if you can just make room for it. And then again, coming back to the sense of your body seated. It's the body's always in the present moment, so lets us come back.

Judy Bushnell:

So I can just do a quick body scan, we can notice the feeling of our feet, the soles of our feet, making contact with the floor. And just noticing those sensations of touch or pressure. And then just gently sweeping our attention up the body, and just noticing. Maybe noticing the feeling of the clothing making contact with the skin. Posture. And if you notice any aches or pains along the way, just bring some kind

attention to those sensations. But you don't need to focus on them or stay with them, you can simply note them and move along. So sensations of touch or pressure, tingling, vibration. We may notice the feeling of the temperature of the room against our skin.

Judy Bushnell:

And if you notice any tension in the body as we do this then, if you like, you could just take a bit of a deeper breath and imagine breathing into that part of your body and then relaxing and softening on the out breath, and just letting go of that tension. Softening a little bit. And drop our shoulders, roll them back a bit. Relax the jaw. Just be present, coming home to ourselves, coming home to the body. And just allowing ourselves to be just as we are in this moment, just as it is.

Judy Bushnell:

We may also notice the movement of the breath in the body. So we might become aware of movement in the chest or the belly, rising and falling, expanding, contracting. We also may be aware of sensations in our nostrils. Sometimes we'll notice, as we breathe in, the air a little bit cooler and warmer as we breathe out. We may also notice subtle movements throughout the body, that moves with the breath. Like our shoulders moving. And just noticing our whole body breathing.

Judy Bushnell:

And now I invite you to expand your awareness beyond the body and just noticing the sounds around us. So you can bring your attention to the ambient sounds in the room where you are, and just noticing what's here in this moment. And see if you can just allow yourself to have the bare awareness of hearing and just simply listening. Allowing the sounds to come to you, letting them come and go. You can also expand your awareness to include sounds outside the room that you're in. Your outside. Your office or your home.

Judy Bushnell:

And, from time to time, you'll likely notice that your mind may start to ... So you may find yourself thinking about the sounds that you're hearing, or trying to figure out what the sound is, or you may notice your mind liking, judgements, liking thoughts or not liking thoughts, liking the sounds or not liking the sounds. Thoughts about the sounds. Wondering about the sounds. Thinking about what you're going to have for lunch. The mind can time travel so easily, and this is never a problem.

Judy Bushnell:

So when we practice, when we notice the mind, the thoughts, starting up like this, we don't try to get rid of them but we simply step back a little bit and observe them so we can simply be aware of thinking. And if it's helpful, you can just make a little mental note, thinking or wandering. And then, if you can, see if you can just drop the content or the story and then bring your attention back to just the experience of listening.

Judy Bushnell:

So the mind wanders, we notice it's wandered and we just simply bring it back. Not a problem. And this is like that little mental push-up. So we notice our attention wandering and then we simply note where attention is and then gently bring it back to the experience of listening. So in this way, we can use

sounds as an anchor, or a home base to come back to. Whenever the mind wanders, we can notice and just gently come back.

Judy Bushnell:

So I'm just going to be quiet for a few minutes here, and we can practice together, just listening to the sounds, letting the sounds come to you. You don't need to search them out. And notice when you're hearing the sounds, experiencing the sounds directly. And then you may also notice thinking about the sounds. And when you find your attention wandering into thought, either about the experience you're having or something else, then you simply notice and come back. Notice and come back. So if your mind wanders 100 times it's not a problem, it's all part of the practice. We simply notice and come back.

Judy Bushnell:

When the mind wanders, no problem, we can simply notice thoughts. And we can also notice that the thoughts about the sounds are different from the sounds or the experience of the sounds themselves.

Judy Bushnell:

Just allowing sound to ground you, to be an anchor. To bring you back to the present moment. And just allowing your ears to receive the sounds, just as they are.

Judy Bushnell:

And simply noting any thoughts that arise and just letting them be there, and coming back to the experience of listening and hearing, again and again. This is the way that we can gather our attention, and just finding an anchor and coming back. And just the experience, the awareness of listening. And then just noticing thoughts as they arise, just letting them come and go naturally without becoming caught up in them or caught up in a story about the sound, but just experiencing the sound directly. And just in this moment.

Judy Bushnell:

And now, letting go of sound and bringing your awareness back to your body, the sense of the body seated here. And again, just noticing the feeling of your body seated, the feeling of your body breathing. And again, I invite you to just note what this moment is like and just in sensing the impact of having done this practice. So just noticing thoughts, emotions, sensations, and just allowing yourself to be here, just as you are in this moment. Just as it is.

Judy Bushnell:

And if you like, you can offer yourself some appreciation for trying something new or returning to a practice that you've done before. And if you like, I also invite you if you would like to put your hand on your heart and we can wish ourselves and each other well. So, may we be free from stress and anxiety. May we be happy and peaceful. May we be healthy and strong. And may we accept ourselves just as we are in this moment, just as it is.

Judy Bushnell:

So, if you've had your eyes closed, you can open them up again. And just kind of bring yourself back a bit. And sometimes it's nice to have a little stretch. Wiggle your fingers and toes a little bit and come back.

Judy Bushnell:

So, now you've had an experience of mindful awareness. And this would be considered to be a formal meditation practice. But as I said, there's many ways to be mindful throughout our day. And fortunately, right now, there's also lots of great support for mindfulness.

Resources

Judy Bushnell:

And I'd just like to move on to the next slide and share some resources with you. So these are, of course, not the only resources that are out there, but a lot of them that I use personally and that I share with my students. So, a great introduction to mindfulness is Mindful magazine. And they have many great resources, articles that you can read about mindfulness. Lots of articles about relational mindfulness you can check out to learn more about how to practice relational mindfulness. And informal mindfulness practices like activities in daily life that you can do, and also lots of great guided practices as well.

Judy Bushnell:

UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center also has some great resources on their website, and they have developed an app also that's free. And I think it's UCLA Mindful. And they also have podcasts that you can listen to. I think every Thursday at 12:30 or noon, they have podcasts that they ... A live practice that they do. It's about half an hour long, usually facilitated by Diana Winston. But other people from the MARC program as well. Lots of good resources on their website. Lots of good guided meditations in English and in Spanish, so that's a favorite of mine.

Judy Bushnell:

Another one that's really good is UC Berkeley has a website called Greater Good in Action, that has a lot of great practices, including gratitude practices. But they have lots of good self-compassion practices, mindful self-compassion practices, mindfulness practices. And some very accessible quick ones, so that when you're just learning or if you're just starting out, five minutes. Usually something that's doable for most of us. And quite well put together. And all evidence-based.

Judy Bushnell:

Another favorite of mine is the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion, has information about training. Dr. Kristin Neff and Dr. Chris Germer have some wonderful resources on their website about self-compassion and mindful self-compassion. And they have a lot of guided practices, formal meditations. And they also offer training in mindful self-compassion for teachers who want to learn to teach the program and for people who want to learn to practice mindful self-compassion, with the more focus on self-compassion, of course.

Judy Bushnell:

And another website I really quite like is Contemplative Mind in Higher Education. And there's some good stuff on there.

Judy Bushnell:

So, as well as all of these, there's some great books on mindfulness. No shortage of those. As well as lots of great apps, and many that are free. Students tell me they enjoy the Headspace app, and I think that

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one you pay for, at least for the premium content. But a lot of people really like that one. MyLife, which used to be called Stop, Breathe & Think, also has some good free content. Insight Timer has a lot of great, free content. And as I mentioned, the UCLA Mindful app is free and very good as well.

Q&A

Judy Bushnell:

So, that's the end of the main part of my presentation. And I'd just like to open it up for questions, if anyone has any questions?

Duane Seibel:

Anybody wanting to ask a question can unmute their mic and ask. Or if you want, you can type something in the chat area and we'll read it for you.

Duane Seibel:

Okay. Fight another minute.

Speaker 3:

Hi.

Duane Seibel:

Hi.

Judy Bushnell:

Hello.

Speaker 3:

Hi. I have a question, I'm not sure if it's for Judy or for the BCcampus folks. But I understand you may be looking for some guest facilitators through this fall for the mindfulness sessions that are running, coming up.

Duane Seibel:

Yeah, I think I'll speak to that. I'll mention at the end and provide my contact information. We are hoping to have participation from many counselors across the BC post-secondary system, to come in and share some practices.

Speaker 3:

And can you just speak to a little bit more about what you're looking for, for the commitment and et cetera about that? Yeah.

Duane Seibel:

Sure. We plan, through the fall, to try this. And bring people together maybe every Monday morning at 9:30. And really, a wide range of experiences, depending on what you might be using with students or in your own practice.

Duane Seibel:

I'll provide contact information, this commitment of being here and present and sharing one Monday this fall.

Speaker 3:

Okay, thanks.

Duane Seibel:

Okay. And just-

Judy Bushnell:

I lost my video, sorry about that.

Conclusion

Duane Seibel:

Oh, okay. Okay, and I don't see any other questions coming up at this point. Just lots of thank you's to Judy for participating. So I'd like to thank our acknowledgement and appreciation for Judy to facilitate this session, and taking us through that guided practice. It's the first webinar I participated in where my eyes were shut for a good portion of it.

Duane Seibel:

This is the launch of our Mindful Mondays as I mentioned, and we'll have one of these each Monday through the fall. And we hope to make this a regular part of your weekly routine so you can start things positively.

Duane Seibel:

Judy, we'll lead the drop-in session next week. Thank you all for participating and making time for yourself, as we know how busy you are at the start of a new semester. You can access or recommend this recording to others through the BCcampus website, and we have the link up there with our webinars.

Duane Seibel:

Also, please consider subscribing to the BCcampus newsletter to be kept up-to-date on upcoming webinars. If you are a counselor in the BC post-secondary system and would like to facilitate 15 or 20 minute guided practice session, please contact me directly, my email's being placed in the chat area.

Duane Seibel:

I also like to acknowledge Paula and Kelsey, part of our technical team and in the background, for their unwavering support of our sessions. And welcome [Sahil 00:44:57] and Paul, two co-op students from the University of Victoria, who just joined BCcampus team and are onboarding this week.

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Duane Seibel:

So I do hope to see the same names back next week, with a lot more. I see lots of familiar names in the area.

Duane Seibel:

Thanks again. Have a good week.