

Life Skills 101 Podcast – Ep. 5 with Elizabeth Manley

Becca Weston – BW

Elizabeth Manley – EM

BW – 0:00

Hey, I'm Rebecca Weston and you're listening to the Life Skills 101 podcast from the Student Experience Office.

We will be joined by former Olympic figure skater, Elizabeth Manley. Before competing at the 1988 Olympic Games that took place in Calgary, Elizabeth was struggling with mental health. Although Elizabeth is not a Carleton alum, she is extremely involved in the Ottawa and Carleton community. Today, Elizabeth talks about how her career as a figure skater led her to coaching others on how to deal with mental health.

Hi Elizabeth, it's really nice having you here today.

EM – 0:43

Oh, thank you. It truly is my pleasure.

BW – 0:46

So, after being in the Olympics and competing and having to do all of that, you've also dealt with some other things that were behind the scenes when you were going through to the Olympics. What were those things and how did that affect your performance?

EM – 1:03

Well, I went through a very difficult time as an elite athlete and I was at a very young age. It's a bit of a long story, but to kind of sum it up, at sixteen years old, just when I was making that pinnacle part of my career where there was a chance that I could make it to the Olympics, I was diagnosed with depression, anxiety, and had a nervous breakdown.

And the way we found out was my body literally completely fell apart. I gained over fifty pounds in water retention, and I lost all my hair. I went bald. And when this was happening, we were completely unsure of why this was happening. When I got the diagnosis, it was very confusing to my family, to myself, to my coaches, to everybody, because we didn't really understand how this would be possible when there was no history of mental health in our family. Or, you know, a history of it even further down in my family tree, but there doesn't have to be.

What it ended up being was the fact that I was trained as an athlete to keep everything inside. If I was to express my feelings or emotions or things that might be bothering me, then I was looked at as being weak and not a tough competitor. Literally was told by society that because I suffered from mental health, I wasn't strong enough. I was never going to be successful in everything I did. The stigma of mental health in the 80s was at its highest, so you can only imagine the stigma in those days... and even I'm guilty of it.

When we thought of mental health, the first thoughts that would come in our heads back in those days was straight jackets and mental hospitals. We didn't understand that there were different avenues of mental health, and interestingly enough, as an adult when I look back, I see that there were some mental health issues even among my own family. Between depression and things like that. But I feel like what happened was so much was built up inside me. So much pressure of being an elite athlete. I'm sixteen years old representing an entire country.

And the only way my body could let me know that something was going on was to physically just completely break down, and that was my path of kind of self-recovery, which sounds really sad. But the self-recovery really was what was initiated, because I wasn't capable of the consideration of taking drug therapy because I was an athlete. We were tested for everything. So, if there was a desire for me to keep stating, at some point in my future, I didn't want to be on medication just in case it wasn't permitted for an elite sport event like the Olympics let's say.

The other option I was given was talk therapy, and in those days, there were very limited avenues for talk therapy. And if you could get talk therapy, you were put on a very lengthy waiting list and it was extremely expensive. And I was in a lifestyle where my mother struggled to keep me in this sport. Financially, we had no money. It was just her and me alone.

I'll share with you that night that the conclusion was I had to quit skating. It was the first time in my life and it took me a very long time to be very open about this to the public because of the stigma. But I was a sixteen-year-old girl sitting on the side of my bed, bald, completely overweight, had to quit skating... I really felt like I had let the entire world down. I felt like I had let my family down, my coaches, my organization, and most of all, I felt like I let Canada down. And that's a lot on a sixteen-year-old's shoulders.

The only thing going through my mind that night was I think the world would be better without me. The suicidal thoughts were there and they were very strong. But being sixteen and having my whole world just ripped from underneath my feet, it was very difficult for me to have those thoughts and to think about it to the point where I cried so hard that night that I fell asleep, only to wake up to some phone calls offering me some help to continue my skating and to get the help that I needed.

And this particular individual reached out to us, Dr. Terry Orlick from Ottawa University, wanted to help me pro bono. He knew our finance situation, he knew what I was going through and he had kind of an intuition inside him, that he could fix me. That he could help me. And he reached out to us. And my initial response was "No." I felt no one could help me. I was at the lowest point in my life. When you go through mental health issues, you really do think that no one can help you. You've hit rock bottom, why would anybody want to help me? What makes him think he can fix me? I can't even fix myself. Things like that.

It was only the reaction of my mother, with a tear coming out of her eye, when she asked me to go and see him. When I said no, and I saw the tear coming out of her eye, I went "Okay. For you, I'll do it." And it's a bit of a fairy tale story. After that, one session turned into ten, turned into hundreds, turned into four years, and turned into that moment when I received that uniform to the Calgary Olympics, and every athlete's dream to compete in their home country.

But through that process, I really was able to find myself and figure out what my needs were and to understand that I am a human being. And then I need to take care of myself a little bit better and to love myself again, and to love my sport again. And that's how I got back to it. I came back to skating with a whole new attitude towards loving myself, taking care of myself, and loving the sport again.

BW – 7:07

It's amazing that you were able to have that night. Unfortunate that you had to cry yourself to sleep, but waking up the next day, and then being able to take those next steps, even when it felt like that was too much. It's amazing to see that you persevered. So, after this incredibly hard time in your life, you took slow steps towards getting to the Olympics and then finally getting there. What did that feel like?

EM – 7:35

Well, it was a bit of a roller coaster. I have to tell you. And not only was I completely grateful for the amount of support that I received from Ottawa, in general, was I was never judged by this city. I was never judged by individuals. I was embraced. And I was given a lot of support through this journey that I was going through, only to have a local newspaper reach out to me about a week and a half or two weeks before the Olympics and asking me to do an article on me before I left for the Olympics.

And I had avoided media for quite a while at this point, because they really wanted to just talk about mental health and in my situation, it was almost in a bit of a negative way. Kind of anything that was written or talked about, made me feel judged and made me feel not confident and not capable of doing what I knew I could do. So, when this newspaper asked to do an interview with me, I okayed it.

And I felt good. I was mentally, physically in a great place going into the Olympics, and only to have them come over and do the interview and take a picture with a brand-new puppy we had just bought and put the puppy on my shoulder and took pictures of me at home. And I thought it went really well.

Next morning, I run over to Mac's Milk and I smack the fifty cents on the counter and I grab the newspaper and I run home with it. And I saw this beautiful big picture of me and the puppy on my shoulder and I was the front page. And it was one of these folded papers. So, when I opened it up the article was the entire front page, and the headline, which stopped me in my tracks, said "Manley dogged my inconsistency will never win a medal." And I was devastated.

My entire emotional well-being, my mental well-being. Everything I had worked so hard on in getting myself back on track, literally was just sucked out of me in five minutes. I read the article, and the article really focused in on my mental health, and more or less said "I wasn't strong enough to even consider

being an Olympic medalist. People who suffer from mental health aren't champions. They're not successful. They have problems." It was a very negative article and I fell apart.

In that entire day, I unplugged my phone, I threw my equipment in the garage, I stayed in my pajamas, and I never showed up at the rink for two days to train. And this is like a week and a half before I have to leave for the greatest moment in my life and I've just been kicked in the gut. I remember my coach coming over to me saying "Why haven't you been at the rink?" And I literally said I wasn't going to the Olympics and his response was "Why? Why would you not go to the Olympics?" I said "How am I supposed to go out in front of two and a half billion viewers?" ...which is how many watched that night in Calgary. "How am I supposed to go out in front of two and a half billion viewers and do what I know I can do when two and a half billion viewers think that I am mentally unstable.

I remember my coach saying "It's just a reporter. You can't let that get to you." But I remember thinking that's what the world thought when you suffer from something. You have this inflated vision of what people are saying about you behind your back, or how they're looking at you, how they're treating you, right?

So, not only am I dealing with depression and anxiety, I'm now feeling like the whole world is looking at me in a different light. And he gave me twelve hours to think about it. But during that twelve hours, because I was mentally really kicked down and knocked down, I physically got sick. So, I ended up turning it around and I truly believe that one of the things that I said through my entire journey with mental health was "I'm not going to let anyone tell me I can't do something. I'm going to take care of me and I'm going to do it my way." And I remember coming back with that feeling the next day, no one's going to tell me I can't do this.

And I don't know if it was a determination to prove to the world or was it a determination to prove to myself that I'm okay. When I arrived in Calgary, I was deathly ill. I was running a fever, I had walking pneumonia, and I even blew an eardrum on the flight on the way out. So, I was a hot mess. When I arrived, I ended up getting through the first two events and my fever spiked again. The world doesn't know this because once again, we're in that position where we don't want to let people know just how sick I am.

But it came down to a point where the Olympic Committee, my organization, and everybody felt that I really wasn't going to be able to finish the Olympics. So, they were about to pull me out after the short program, after the second event and we had three events to do. But there was a day off between the second and third events, so I begged them for my day off so I could possibly see if I was going to feel better by the final event. The next day changed my entire journey in life and I want to share that story with you.

When I arrived at my practice session, I was feeling horrible and we had to make the decision if I was withdrawing after this practice in order for organizations to announce it. I was sitting in third place at this point. So, When I got to my practice, the weirdest thing happened. I got on the ice and the entire Olympic hockey team walked into my practice. You never see a hockey team at a figure skating practice. It's just something you just don't see. So, this was something that kind of made me go "What's going on here?" And I remember my coach saying "Can we concentrate?" and I said "Even the Olympic hockey team isn't helping me at this moment, but I'm just very curious why they're at my practice."

When my practice ended, my coach and I decided to have our own meeting before we made our announcement whether I was going to compete or not. We hadn't made a decision until we were going to sit after the practice. When I came off my practice, I saw the whole hockey team leaving outside the back of the Saddledome, which was the arena I competed in, and as I was coming through the curtains and I saw the hockey players exiting, I was like "Why are they here? Why were they at my practice?"

And as I came around the corner, the only person in the hallway walking right towards me was the hockey coach. I didn't know who this individual was. But because we were the only two people in the hallway at that moment, I figured I'd better say something. So, I walked up to him, I put my hand out and I said "Hi, I'm Elizabeth Manley." And he laughed and he said "I know exactly who you are." And he was giggling and I said "Thank you for coming to my practice and supporting me, but I really need to ask you, why were you here?" And he said "Elizabeth, the team's waiting for me on the bus, so I've only got a second, but we were practicing on the rink next door to the main building..." the Saddledome, and he said "We've got our biggest game of the games tonight. We play Russia." And he said "We weren't practicing that well, so I felt the best thing I could do for the team at this moment was pull them off and come make them watch a champion."

I was in such shock because you can imagine I've been feeling pretty bullied and beaten up at this point. I was in such shock that I literally looked behind me because I thought maybe my competitor was there and he wasn't talking to me. And I went "Excuse me?" and he said "Thank you for inspiring my team. Knock them dead tomorrow." And he walked away.

I remember bending over in shock that this was a complete stranger at such a pinnacle moment in my life, because I was about to make a decision if I was going to keep going, and he gave me this compliment. And my coach came around the corner, he saw me, he ran over to me, and he said when I stood up, he had never seen this look in my eyes before. I said "Call the meeting off." And he went "Why?" and I said "Call the meeting off. No matter what, I'm competing tomorrow." And he said "What just happened?" and I said "You know what, I'll tell you later but right now I just want to embrace what just happened." And twelve hours later, my dream came true. I won the night and came second overall, but I won the night. I was not expected. I was an underdog. I came out of nowhere, and the reason why I'm telling this story is for two reasons. Words matter. Words really matter.

As a society today, we do not take enough time to be positive and to be complimentary to make someone's day. And this stranger came up to me and he changed the entire journey of my life, because I was possibly ten minutes from pulling out of the games. And that's how impactful our words are to people today. I'm a life coach now, I work with many people, but I make my clients, once a day, give a stranger a compliment. And not only is it empowering for you, for you to feel about giving somebody a compliment, but you might not know that could be another Elizabeth Manley. And just by being kind and compassionate and supportive, you can change somebody's journey. Because you don't know what everybody's going through. You don't understand their journey in life, right?

And the second reason why I like to tell this story is because that medal was a medal in life. That was a gold medal in life that I won and I won that medal for anybody that's ever suffered. For all Canadians, I won that medal for mental health. I won that medal for that no matter what we're going through and how bad it seems, we can all be resilient. If we love something and we believe in ourselves enough and we're passionate, amazing things can happen.

And when I talk to students at Carleton, I've done quite a few talks with students and I want them to understand that, especially in university, the stress levels are so high. You have deadlines, you have to get this done, you have the pressures of doing well in school because it's your future and so forth. But you've got to learn how to ignore all that negativity and the naysayers saying "You're not good enough, you can't do it, you're never going to be successful." You've got to be able to block that out and you've got to be able to go after what you want. And everybody can go after anything they want and I'm a perfect example of that.

BW – 19:09

I know that you talk a lot to students and that you've actually recently talked to Carleton students at the SOAR Student Leadership Conference. What did students ask you during that talk?

EM – 19:21

Mainly just about how do I get through my days. If I wake up one morning and I'm really down, how do I get myself going? And that was a really big question with students because I feel that's probably what they're going through. They wake up in the morning and go "Oh, I've got so much to do today. How do I even go after it?" And my answer to that is learn to, I hate using the word balance because everybody says balance, balance, balance. No one has a balanced life, what are you talking about, right? I get that a lot. But there's a sense of balance that we can all go after and that's making sure when we wake up in the morning we're prepared.

Okay, instead of doing fifty things in one day, let's only attack five things and get them completed. I think what happens is we put so much on our plates on a daily basis that we dabble in a hundred different things, but we never feel like we're completing things. We're never finishing things, right? So, write down your list of a hundred things to do, but focus on five things a day. And if you can, if you pull back and only do that, you'll be amazed at what you can get done and that's one of the biggest things. So, it's a matter of understanding how to manage your days and how to believe in your goals and your passions. Another thing too that I've mentioned to them is I find that we've lost that whole concept of having goals. We're so focused in on getting things done that we lose the focus on what our goal is. And one of the things that I emphasize with the students during leadership is look at your life in five-year spans. Look at where you want to be in five years.

If you look at your life by year, you're putting too much pressure on yourself. You're expecting success too quick. It takes a long time. It took me twenty-two years to stand on that podium. It didn't take me a week, you know what I mean? It takes a long time. And if you look at your life in a five-year cycle, you know Olympians look at them in a four-year cycle, I've always lived in a four-year cycle, but for my coaching and life coaching and working with individuals like students, I make them look at a five-year cycle. Because it takes a little bit of that pressure off to be successful quick. I'll ask a student "You want to be a millionaire?" and of course they say "Yes, I want to be a millionaire." Okay, so how are we going to get you there and let's take five years to really set up that journey. You can't be a millionaire tomorrow. God, if we could, we'd all be millionaires. We'd all be very happy, but it just doesn't work that way. You have to be patient in life.

BW – 22:13

And I think that's something that a lot of students are struggling with right now is, we've had two years of pretty much just bad news from schools of you can't come back, "Hey, you can come back but you probably won't be able to come on campus." And just this on and off and there's no uncertainty.

EM – 22:36

And yeah, that's life. The uncertainties of life, right? And how do we handle it. Do we have a temper tantrum and stomp our feet and go "Ugh."? You know, do we do that? Yes, we can do that. I always say, take your twelve-hour day. Cry, eat ice cream, do whatever you need to do, Netflix binge, do whatever you do. Be a victim. Feel sorry for yourself. But after twelve hours, you've got to pick up the big girl pants and you've got to get on with life.

BW – 23:07

We talk a lot about burnout, and I feel like with the age of the pandemic, it's so much easier to get burnout because we're just not really moving. We're always stagnant and always in front of a screen. So, for students who are in the middle of their semester and they feel really overwhelmed by the amount of work and having to go to lectures, and maybe it's the hybrid classes. What would you recommend for them... how would they talk to a prof about "I need this time." kind of thing?

EM – 23:37

You really need to be able to be honest with them. You need to feel comfortable, whether you're connecting with a professor and saying "Listen, my mental health right now is not good and I'm trying to take care of it and I just need twelve hours." Either to complete something or to get this done. You will be amazed at the support Carleton has right now for mental health. That's why I'm a part of it now, because I'm so impressed with what's available to the students at Carleton University. Whether it's seeking out help, whether it's working with somebody, whether it's "Can I get Liz Manley's phone number and just give her a call?" Like, I'm here, this is what it's about. Right?

I think students fear speaking up and that is where overwhelm comes in. I think I said this to one student another time, when we get overwhelmed that turns into procrastination, which turns into fear, which turns into... We literally become paralyzed and we literally just go into depression and anxiety and that's what students do. Students unfortunately do that. They see this entire load of work they have to get done, so procrastination kicks in because you don't where to even start. So, you say "I'll think about it in an hour." An hour turns into a day, which turns into two days, and now you're cramming and now you're not getting sleep. Now you're not getting out. Now you're in front of a screen for multiple hours and that's so unhealthy.

And that's why I say spread it out over a period of time. If a professor says "You've got a week to get this done." Spend an hour a day on it. Spend two hours a day. Don't spend a twelve-hour chunk at one point because that's when you get exhausted and burn out. And you don't give yourself that capability of getting out and having a walk or talking to your family or doing things like that. You're isolated at school, you can't socialize with your friends. You really can't.

So, how do you make yourself better? That's balancing your schedule, being open with your professors. I know, you're going to have your tough ones, you're going to have your easy ones, professors, right? You're going to have those ones you're scared of and the ones that you think don't like you or whatever, right? But until you present yourself in front of them and say "Listen, I'm struggling." I promise you, they're going to be there for you. And they're going to help you and they're going through it too. So, this isn't something new for them.

Sometimes, when we're younger, we have a tendency to think "It's just us, why do I feel this way?" And that student over there seems like they're just flying through this like it's no problem. You don't know that, right? Some people are struggling just as much as you and teachers are struggling just as much as students. So, if you have that courage to just be open with them in a very sincere, honest way, you will be amazed at how they'll go "Oh, I thought it was just me. Yes, I'll give you another day." Or whatever. But you don't know until you ask.

If they say no, okay. But at least you asked, right? And now you've made that professor aware that you're doing your best, right? Don't keep it hidden, don't hide your struggles.

BW – 27:06

Well, I could go on talking to you for hours but I think that's all of my questions for today. Thank you so much, Elizabeth, for taking the time to speak with me on the podcast.

EM – 27:17

Thank you. And like I said, I'm here. I'm part of the Carleton family now. If anyone wants to just reach out after this podcast, just reach out to the Psychology Department and they'll connect you through me.

BW – 27:29

Amazing, thank you so much.

ENM – 27:32

Thanks.