



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 134: DR. KELLY CRACE – COVID-19 & YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

Ken White

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, this is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, everywhere you turn, you're hearing and reading more about coronavirus, testing kits, the number of cases, quarantines, the effects to the economy, and the stock market, universities, and schools going online, people working from home. It's clearly the top of mind issue and new territory for everyone. Well, managing your thoughts and emotions during this unprecedented disruption will have a great effect on your attitude, outlook, and overall mental health. Dr. Kelly Crace is a licensed psychologist. He's Associate Vice President for Health and Wellness and Director of the Center for Mindfulness and Authentic Excellence at William & Mary. He joins us today to explain how you can not only manage, but flourish in this time of change. Here's our conversation with Dr. Kelly Crace.

Ken White

Kelly, thank you very much for joining us. Greatly appreciate your time.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Thanks, Ken. It's always an honor and pleasure to be a part of the series, as well as to spend a little more time with you. So thank you.

Ken White

Well, you know, before we start talking about the topic, we have always done face to face interviews. We've never relied on technology. So you and I sort of face to face. We see each other on Zoom, but we're recording it this way. And I have a feeling we'll be doing several podcasts in the future this way until things that I get back to normal. But thank you very much. The unprecedented times. Right? And these are stressful times. Why do change and uncertainty, uncertainty like this cause us stress?

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, it's you know, there's kind of different layers. There's kind of this universal human layer that's kind of a part of all of our minds, our brain. Then there's a personal level and kind of a cultural level. At all levels, our brain processes change as stressful because, with change, you're always leaving something. Something is now different that you are leaving, and by leaving it, it was known. So it's moving from something that was known into something different. And there's always uncertainty with where we're moving. So that our brain processes that as both loss and fear, the loss of what you're leaving, and the fear of what is uncertain ahead of you. And so that's stressful. It doesn't necessarily mean bad stress. Even the most positive changes are stressful at some level. But then if you add on to that an unwanted change or an unexpected change, we're kind of this universal chronic level of uncertainty such as this pandemic. It just heightens that sense of stress even more. And then you have the personal level. You know, some people kind of get excited by change. And some people really like for things to be the same. They don't want to change. So there's this personal level of how we react to it. And then there's a cultural level. We come from various cultures where we may come from a culture where change has always been threatening and has had awfulness attached to it. And then there are cultures where change has been a positive thing. So all of that matters in how we think of this particular uncertain time that's ahead of us.

Ken White

Interesting that you mentioned personal level. We've had a number of virtual town hall meetings with our students so over the past few days and how some are looking at this. Yeah, as really positive. This is exciting. Let's see. Let's see what happens. And others a little less tentative or a little more tentative, rather. Yeah, which is understandable. And your work, you say we can flourish through this unwanted uncertainty by considering the work of wellness and resilience. And you've spelled out some steps. Can we walk through those steps that students and working adults can focus on?

Dr. Kelly Crace

Absolutely. And remember kind of how we have always defined flourishing as we define flourishing as a consistent level, not a perfect level, but a consistent level of productivity and fulfillment and resilience. So you feel like you're doing good work. You find meaning in that work, and you find yourself to be resilient to the hardness of that work. So that's kind of really what we're focusing on when we think about flourishing.

Ken White

And through the change, we want to stay consistent as well.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Absolutely.

Ken White

Right.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Absolutely.

Ken White

So one of the things you had laid out, is you say, fear has its place. What do you mean by that?

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, I think during these times, it's important to remember kind of the utility of fear and the function of fear. Fear is essentially a it can be a very healthy emotion because it's designed to protect us from hurt. It's a level of awareness that we have developed over evolution and over our lives of this sense that something bad or something hurtful could happen. Fear has its place here because there is a lot of uncertainty. This is new. This is unprecedented. This is a global issue that is causing all of us to kind of wonder and worry. And so I think worry has its place. It's not I don't think it's healthy for us to kind of try to convince ourselves to not be worried, because our wisdom is kind of poking at us saying well you do kind of have something to worry about. There's uncertainty here, and you could get hurt. You know that that possibility is there. So the difference is effective versus ineffective worry. Effective worry is being able to listen to your worry and fear and then act in a healthy way so it can be motivational. It can motivate me to take this seriously. It can motivate me to be informed. It can motivate me to learn. What does what is this new thing called social distancing and self-quarantine. It can help motivate me to be informed and to do things that are right and purposeful in my life. Ineffective worry is when you just start spinning. You know that you start spinning on all the what-ifs and all the uncertainties and all the worries, all the what-ifs that are out there. And without anything to do about it, that feels like we can fix it. So this is one of those pandemics that an individual themselves can feel helpless in. So they can spin with that worry. They can get overwhelmed by it. They can go through this. They can go through kind of compulsive rituals to try to calm themselves down, or they can go to the opposite end and just kind of move into this need for it to not be real, not be serious. That I just need this to not be so serious as everyone's making it out to be. So then they just ignore it and move into kind of reckless behavior and hang out with everybody and just pretend it's not even there. Those are typically the unhealthy kind of ineffective worry cause it leads us to actually be more anxious and more overwhelmed.

Ken White

The trap of chasing calm or happiness.

Dr. Kelly Crace

So ineffective worry when we do get overwhelmed. And we are feeling or if we're just normally feeling upset. People go through different ranges of feelings around this, from worry to anger, you know, looking and see how things that they feel may be done right. And things that may they feel like they're not being done right and it's upsetting them. That type of thing. It can be this aspect of this kind of worry that is both about mourning and anxiety that I can be actually mourning what I'm seeing around me. I'm feeling a sense of loss. I'm feeling a sense of loss of what I expected. Think of our students and our faculty and staff that and the parents that their lives have kind of completely changed here. And that can cause us to kind of chase calmness. We kind of rush to calm. We rush to feel better. That typically doesn't work because what it does is it causes us to be so over sensitized to how we're emotionally feeling in the moment that we kind of start defining our day by that. So how was today? Today was a good day. I was calm. Today was a bad day. I was really anxious. We're constantly checking in on our emotions. And a lot of times when we're feeling upset, we not only want to go to calm. We want to kind of go to the other complete and try to find happiness. So we try to chase anything that will make us not only feel calm but to make us feel really good and make us feel really happy. Instead of kind of chasing calm and happy. We really kind of want to move toward instead of calm, move toward self-care instead of happy, move toward kind of purposeful, meaningful things. It's okay to go through enjoyment. It's okay to look for enjoyable things, but not necessarily for the purpose of feeling good. It's more for the purpose of enjoyment is healthy. So it's good to have some enjoyment in your life, but especially important to have a sense of purpose and meaning in your life where you feel like you're acting on things that are right.

Ken White

Become values focused amidst uncertainty.

Dr. Kelly Crace

So one of the best ways to find a sense of personal agency, a sense of personal control when when we're surrounded by a lot of uncertainty and a lot of helplessness of, you know, how do I fix this or how do I change this thing that's worrying me. Is it a lot of times if we can if we overfocus on trying to reduce something, I'm trying to reduce being overwhelmed or reduce being worried, that doesn't work too well, because we tend to kind of be more preoccupied the more we try to reduce something.

Ken White

Yeah.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Instead, if we can try to increase something positive and focus on that, that's more helpful. And one of the most positive things to get at is one of your purest forms of motivation, and that is that your values. And so if we can kind of start every day looking for a sense of purpose and meaning by asking ourselves what matters most today, you can start off with kind of generally what matters. But of those things that matter. These things that matter to me, what matters most, and then what matters second-most. So you want to kind of clarify what matters to me today but then prioritize to. What's most important to me today. If you can engage in those things of value, what you're doing is you're creating purpose in your life. If at the end of the day, you can also take a moment and appreciate where you acted on that, that creates meaning. A lot of people kind of equate purpose and meaning. Purpose is a little more. They're very similar. The purpose is kind of a motivational type thing, a direction of your energy. Meaning is kind of reflective part of reflecting and letting that paint dry instead of skimming over it and just saying going on to the next thing. It's really important during this time of worry that you stop and say take a moment and reflect and appreciate where you acted on things of purpose today. That's what creates a sense of meaning.

Ken White

Understand your personal experience and change and loss. What do you mean by that?

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, I think it's important during these times to really reflect on the personal sense that this has on you. We can reasonably infer that everyone has been affected by this change. Everyone is adjusting at some level, but we just don't know what this change means to everyone. For some, it's exciting. For some, it can be very threatening. For some, it's changing kind of completely their thought of what, like, for instance, for students, what the second half of this semester was going to be like, especially for our graduates, our undergraduate and graduate students. This looks completely different. So it's important to really understand your sense of what this means to me. How is this impacting me? What do I think about it? What I feel about it. And the important thing about that is don't judge what you're learning in your reflection. As I think about what this is. It's important to honor what I'm understanding rather than immediately judging it as a good feeling or a bad thought. It's allowing it to be okay that whatever I'm experiencing, this is normal and appropriate. And then you kind of want to think about how do I want to talk about that with other people? Most people are not completely alone. They're in the house with someone else right now and often with a lot of people. You've mentioned how your whole family is kind of coming together from all of their areas.

Ken White

Right.

Dr. Kelly Crace

And so it's about being able to. How do we share this with each other? How do we seek to understand each other's personal experiences? Then assume them instead. Because I'm feeling this way. I just assume everyone is feeling this way. It's important to ask and not assume and kind of how is this impacting you? And it's also it's important to be sensitive to impact. I may want to kind of talk about this a lot, but I may recognize someone in my house may not want to talk about it so much. So it's being sensitive to impact as well, to kind of think about how and how this experience is affecting me.

Ken White

Wow, that's such a great point. You're right. I know I find it fascinating to talk about it and to think about the future where we're going. Not thinking maybe somebody around me it's the last thing they want to hear.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah.

Ken White

Yeah, that's an interesting point. Possibility versus probability. I find this real interesting.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, that's a real important thing in terms of how we manage worry and also what can lead to effective worry versus ineffective worry. Fear causes the possible to feel probable. So when we're in a fear state, when we're worried and afraid, we think of a lot of what-ifs, and all of those what-ifs probably are possible. But when we're leading with fear, those possible things start to feel probable. Well, the interesting thing is we brace ourselves. Our mind is very protective. And so anything that is probable and negative, we immediately feel compelled to act on that in some level. So if you're not afraid right now that there's a poisonous snake underneath your chair because you kind of know your surroundings around you. Is it possible? Yes, but it's not probable. But let's say things change somehow and you're in your environment there where it became probable

Ken White

Right.

Dr. Kelly Crace

you wouldn't just be sitting here talking to me right now. You would be acting in some way. You'll be doing something that would be protective. Well, the same thing exists with this. We can what if our ourselves to a place where possible starts to feel probable, and

you want to use your analytical mind as well as the help around you, support around you to really discern what's possible versus what's probable? Individuals may be thinking, is it possible that I could really, really something really bad could happen to me if I get sick, you know? Is that possible? Yes.

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Dr. Kelly Crace

But if I think about, okay, well, what am I doing to take care of myself and what am I doing to be healthy, and what am I doing to self corner? Is it possible? Yes. Is it probable? No. And so the point is you can always want to land on probable. It's okay for the reaction to be all of it, you know. But you want to go through a period of discernment to where you land on probable and you kind of commit your behavior to the problem. Even if I may feel still worried,

Ken White

Hmm-mmm.

Dr. Kelly Crace

I'm going to commit my behavior to the probable.

Ken White

That's great. Yeah. And I can see many people going the wrong path there. That's great.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Dr. Kelly Crace, Associate Vice President for Health and Wellness at William & Mary, in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at William & Mary's School of Business. The best businesses and organizations in the world invest in educating and retaining top employees. And many of those businesses call on William & Mary's Center for Corporate Education to create and deliver customized executive education programs. The programs are designed and taught by William & Mary's top-ranked MBA faculty. If your organization wants to educate and retain its top people, contact the Center for Corporate Education, or visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with Dr. Kelly Crace.

Ken White

Stay informed, not stuck.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, and worry can cause us to really seek a lot of information and where we seek information to try to find a sense of calm, to find a sense of agency or control. It is so easy today with so many of the competitive news channels and the noted competitive news sources. It's important to remember that it's also their motivation to make sure that you stay on their channel, that you stay with them. So they need to compel you. They need to captivate you. So evocative news can often, often be a part of what we're experiencing. And all that does that escalates our worry it escalates the what-ifs. At the same time, you want to be informed. You want to feel like, you know, I'm still learning about this, and learning and growing from this is important. But you want to do it in ways that you feel are healthy for you. So be sensitive to the impact information is having on you and figure out your, like for me, I've learned, you know, I. For me personally, I just. I go to NPR once a day and get and get my updates that take about 10 minutes. And that's about as much as I really want to help me feel informed. But if I do it twice a day, it just feels like too much. I start thinking about it more. I start worrying about it more. Find out what your exposure time kind of your SPF factors. We do that with suntan lotion, with SPF factor. Find out what your exposure you need to news and information that helps you and try to find sources that can give it to you. In brief, brief bites without a lot of evocative emotion to it, let it be factual so you can learn without being stirred

Ken White

Yeah, that's great. And I think social media can really take you down, too. If you're on something like Twitter and a negative thread can just take off and take you right with it. That's great advice. Yeah.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Oh, completely agree. And there's also that added feeling of the anonymity in social media

Ken White

Yes.

Dr. Kelly Crace

where people can post things that are very evocative without recourse or without consequence. So that's a really good point.

Ken White

Soothing versus self-care.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, it kind of relates to what we had talked about earlier in terms of chasing calm, you know, and soothing, soothing, and self-care in terms of the actual behavior. It can look like the same. The key between these two is all the intention. It's about the intention. So with soothing, the intention is to feel better. That's my sole motivation is to feel better. In other words, I feel bad. I want to feel better. The quickest way to do that is to change brain chemistry. And so I will be then if I'm motivated to feel better, I will be motivated to try to change my brain chemistry as quickly as possible. But there are five things that change brain chemistry the quickest, and that's food, drugs, pain, sex, and compelling entertainment. Those are the things that change brain chemistry. And none of those five things are bad in and of themselves. The problem is when the intention is to soothe, we don't moderate those things well, and that's when it can then move to unhealthy kind of behavior. As opposed to self-care, when the motivation is to to to take care of yourself. The intention is to be healthy. And so when the intention is to be healthy, we can pick things that may make us feel better. It's okay. That's kind of a bonus if it does, doesn't have to, but the intention is to be healthy. So examples of healthy self-care are verbal, you know, converting your emotional energy to talking to someone that is safe and trustworthy, that can be verbal expression, that can be to friends or family or a professional, whatever. Converting your emotional energy to physical expression through exercise, through yoga, through breathing, active breathing, progressive relaxation, meditative expressions, and other forms, self-care. And that's where you're converting your emotional energy to some form of meditative expression, be it meditation, mindfulness, prayer. Any of those things that are congruent with your values. And then creative expression is a great form of self self-care where converting your energies to some kind of writing or creative expression. I've been so inspired by some of the things I've heard from families that are being very creative with this time of let's do something new, let's do something different. I know you're planning on doing that with your family, and I've heard so many stories about that. It's a really healthy form of self-care. The last two to think about are sometimes just very simply taking a break from it, sometimes taking a temporary break. And that's when you just get away from it, and you realize you're not denying it. You're not putting a lid on it, but you're putting it on the shelf and saying, I just need a break from that. That's when you go and watch a movie, or you go talk with your friends, but don't talk about it. That distraction can be a even distracting into our work, can be healthy. And then the last thing is, is kind of reminding yourself of what else is true. When we're upset, we can get very myopic in how we're seeing ourselves and seeing this problem. We need to periodically ask what else is true about my life? What else is true about me? What else is true beyond just this pandemic? It's just healthy.

Ken White

Yeah, absolutely. And finally, courage training.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, with courage training. Really, what it's about is recognizing that all these steps that we talk about are hard. It's just hard to do. And it's about kind of changing how we think about hard and how we think about struggle. So many of the things I've heard from colleagues and from students that we're working with during this transition and from peers is they'll say so-and-so is really struggling or I'm really struggling, or we're all struggling with this transition. That type of thing. Struggle is not bad. Struggle in and of itself is not bad. Struggle is a struggle can be a healthy challenge. There's a difference between struggle and strain. There's a difference between challenge and strain. Challenge is good challenge is growth producing. We can step into this new area of pedagogy and feel completely inept in it, but we can struggle through developing a sense of agency. You know, one step at a time. And the wonderful thing about this kind of pedagogy is we don't have to be perfect with it. We can be clumsy with it. We can make mistakes with it, and it's okay. Like you said, we can have children screaming in the background or my five dogs that are right in the same room as me right now.

Ken White

Absolutely.

Dr. Kelly Crace

But those things can happen. It brings the human element of it. The main thing about us recognizing is one you want to honor that this work is hard. It's, and it's only hard. That's the key, is that we don't place a lot of emotional value on hard. You don't lament it. You just accept it for what it is. We accept struggle. We accept hard. And that's actually what courage is. Courage is stepping into right things that are hard. It's stepping into this hardness. That's right to do. It's right for us to be healthy. It's right for us to do pedagogy in this way now. This is right for us. In this rightness, when it's hard, that's actually being courageous. Dr. King, one of my favorite quotes from Dr. King, is heroism is the courage to act every day according to your values. That's heroic. And I think we can find a lot of support with each other by stepping into that courage together. So it's like let's be courageous together. Let's step into this hard together and see it only as hard.

Ken White

Well, and speaking of support, you and your team, the website is absolutely fantastic for the wellness center. And much of what we just talked about is available on there. And you've done a number of things. Because it's interesting in our town hall meetings, we've had with our students in almost every one. They're asking about mental health support. You know, what do we have? And it's fantastic that we can say, boy, you check out what William & Mary is doing, some phenomenal stuff. Can you kind of give us an idea of what's available on the website? And there's a lot of things going on that ordinarily you might

think would have been suspended because we're not meeting face to face, but that's not the case.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Exactly. One of the things that we first lamented and mourned was we've just gotten so much traction with our health and wellness, our programs, our resources, the new integrative wellness center. And the way, you know, over 80 percent of our things, 85 percent of our students access the rec center, the campus rec programs, and so campus recreation and the wellness center. We're just so happy with the work that's being done without students or engaging in these things and really, really grieved the aspect that this wasn't going to be available to them. So our staff immediately starting thinking. Lets create a virtual wellness center. Let's create a health and wellness center that brings the best of campus recreation, the best of the four departments of Integrative Wellness with the counseling center and the health center and health promotion and the Center for Mindfulness & Authentic Excellence. So we started building programs, and that includes live programs and archived programs. Our first program we offered was a live yoga class. We had over 160 people join the class

Ken White

Wow.

Dr. Kelly Crace

and it was great, and we're recording all of these so they'll be archived so you can go on it anytime. We'll be building something new every day and adding new things just like what we do when the buildings were open. We'll be adding new things so students can access. Parents can access. We're also opening this up beyond the William & Mary community. So it's open to the public. Anybody can go on and experiment and look at what is wellness look like for me and try to find a resource there that would speak to you.

Ken White

Yeah, it's fantastic. And it's so important, right? I think that people are feeling it right now, especially I keep thinking of our students at William and Mary, but students all across the country at universities who are now going online. You and I are recording this on Saturday, March 21st. We should point that out to our listeners and come Monday. Oh, boy, it's a big day, so there's a lot of stress leading up to that. And it's great that there's so many things available on the website, so thank you for that. And Kelly, thank you very much for your time. Greatly appreciate it. And take care of yourself. And any words of advice, last parting words for our listeners about the upcoming days and weeks ahead.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Just really kind of stay values focused. Stay with your sense of purpose. Accept the hardness of it. Step into that courage. But more importantly, do the few things that are enjoyable each day. But at the end of every day, really take the time to appreciate. And with each other, talk with each other about appreciating what you did that day with a sense of purpose. And also, my deep gratitude to you Ken to have continually bringing opportunities for us to grow and learn. You're challenging us to grow. You're challenging us to step into hard. So I just really appreciate all the work that you're doing on our behalf.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Dr. Kelly Crace. And that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the William & Mary School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education offers customized leadership development programs that help organizations and businesses develop and retain their best people. To learn more, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Finally, we'd love to hear from you regarding the podcast. We invite you to share your ideas, questions, and thoughts with us by emailing us at podcast@wm.edu. Thanks to our guest this week, Kelly Crace, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week.