

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Dr. Joi Lewis on taking care of yourself in times of tragedy - Extended Conversation
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CATHY WURZER: Well, it is Wednesday. And each Wednesday for the past few weeks, we've had Dr. Joi Lewis with us. Dr. Joi is a community healer, speaker, and founder of Joi Unlimited and the Healing Justice Foundation and author of the book *Healing, the Act of Radical Self-Care*. Today, we're talking about the appeal of shutting down, numbing your feelings when things get overwhelming, and what to do when you want to just stay in bed with the covers over your head when all is dark and chaotic around you. Dr. Joi, welcome back to the program.

JOI LEWIS: Thanks so much, Cathy. Glad to be here.

CATHY WURZER: Oh, I got out of bed this morning. And obviously, you did, too.

JOI LEWIS:

I did, although it was questionable. But I did get up. [LAUGHS]

CATHY WURZER: Good. I'm glad to hear that. In the intro, I mentioned your book, and I would like to read a passage where you wrote about going numb. And you wrote, "It's easy to appear awake but still be dead inside. We may drink, veg out on social media or Netflix, smoke, work too much, have a lot of sex, shop, use street or prescription drugs, or use food," which is my drug of choice. And I think you could probably add gaming or social media surfing to the list, too. Tell us about the urge to just check out.

JOI LEWIS: Yeah. I mean, I feel it. And I'm sure many other folks feel it. I guess what I want to just start with is that it can-- it's kind of tricky. It can appear to just be some kind of individual vice or something like that. But it likely is a trauma response. And so I think it's important that we make sure that we're connecting it to that.

And there may be a term the folks have heard of, "epigenetics." And it can cause changes in our chromosomes, the way that we respond. And it just-- it can make it more difficult for us to deal with stress and prevent illness and trauma and stuff like that. So I don't want people to just think, oh, I just have bad habits. But it actually is likely a trauma response.

CATHY WURZER: How do you know when it's a trauma response versus something like self-care, right? I mean, how many of us like to just get a glass of wine, you go maybe binge a little Netflix, and you just take yourself out of the world for a little bit. Where is the breakdown line there?

JOI LEWIS: Yeah, that's such a good question. One of the ways to know is when we're doing something in excess, right? You kind of know when it's like, OK, I'm just doing this over and over and over again, and I'm not really being conscious or mindful.

But it's like, to make a decision, we want to have these practices of self-care, to know in advance, OK, you know, life is going to be stressful. Life is going to happen. And here are some of the things that I use to help me show up for myself and show up for other folks.

It's an intentional way of living instead of just being scattered and like, oh, OK, I feel like so exhausted at the end of the day, and this is what I'm going to do. And you can kind of feel it in your body when you are really worked up and not necessarily being mindful. Hopefully, we have some time-- there's a practice that I like for people to be conscious about how you can plan for these things.

CATHY WURZER: OK, because I was going to ask-- you also wrote in the book, "I have been aware of my own struggles with going numb and checking out when faced with the cruelty of this world. I needed a process, a tool, a solution to help me show up and get present, stay connected, and reach for my humanity and yours." You want to just give us an idea of what you use?

JOI LEWIS: Yeah. So for me, the tool that I found really is around radical self-care. But oftentimes, when we hear "self-care," it's sometimes framed in a way where it's about an opportunity to just escape or to find a way out of toxic stress and trauma and all of that. And sometimes, self-care can also encourage isolation.

But radical self-care is a bit different. It really is about finding stillness and returning to the present moment again and again. And it's sort of a way in instead of a way out. So the tool that I found, really, it was radical self-care. And I created a whole process around it, the Orange Method of radical self-care. So it really is to help us to really be present.

CATHY WURZER: What is the Orange, or Orange? What does it stand for? What would that be?

JOI LEWIS: Yeah, so the Orange Method of radical self-care has four practices, the first one being meditation to help us get grounded, the second one being mindfulness to help us get present, and emotional liberation to help us get free, and conscious movement to help us get unstuck. And the reason-- you know, yes, anybody who knows me, they know I love orange. But beyond that, orange is the chakra color for-- its in our lower abdomen. And it's where transformation happens.

So, yeah. And these practices, as I said, I didn't create them. They've been around for thousands of years. I can't say, like, I created meditation. But what I do do in this method is to try to remind folks that these things are available to us.

And I'm on a mission to just say, hey, life is hard. All of the hard things that have been happening nonstop, but particularly over these last couple of weeks, stuff with the Supreme Court, people being-- all these shootings, all this stuff, it's like, I want people to have practices and tools that are available to them that are really integrated into their lives.

CATHY WURZER: You mentioned that life is hard. It absolutely is. And you stressed the idea that a lot of what gets us down isn't our fault, that we're in a world that generally blames the individual, even when there's this uneven playing field, systematically speaking, right? So how do you balance taking some personal responsibility for what's going on with you but acknowledging that there is this systemic unfairness and oppression in the world?

JOI LEWIS: Yeah, really good question. First of all, I like to think about it is that we're making a decision, and we have to be willing. And the difference between being willing to do it and wanting to do it is that it's a decision. Willingness is a decision. Wanting is a feeling. And feelings are important, but they're meant to be felt but not-- they don't necessarily get us to a place of making a decision and taking action.

I mean, the truth of the matter is what you just said. None of us have been untouched by the continued, traumatic, systemic oppression and all these things. But self-care becomes a must for everyone, like as primary care.

And I think that we get to acknowledge the sort of-- I guess I would call it transgenerational trauma in the presence of unresolved, collective grief that we're experiencing. So what we do is we make a decision that we care about our own humanity and about each other's. And we are the ones, as June Jordan would say, that we've been waiting on.

So it's this thing of saying, OK, yeah, these things happen to me, just like there may have been things that have been passed down from generations that might show up in my body physically. But in the same way that they show up-- excuse me-- in our everyday lives, we get to make a decision if we are going to be involved in taking somebody-- it's not our fault, but it is our collective responsibility to make sure that we get to reconnect it to our own humanity and to each other.

CATHY

WURZER:

You're talking about checking out, but of course, the opposite of checking out is connecting. And we are a society that's technologically connected. It's easy to send texts and connect with your friends on Facebook and TikTok and what all. But connecting in person seems to be tougher for a lot of people. And I'm wondering, where does connection fit into all of this?

And specifically, you've talked a little bit about this early on in our conversations. After Jamar Clark was killed in North Minneapolis back in 2015, you were part of this partnership that created healing spaces so folks could connect to express what was going on-- rage, frustration, grief, sadness. So let's talk a little bit about that.

JOI LEWIS:

Yeah. Well, it's connection both-- as you said, you mentioned some of the technological ways that we are connected. And that's great. But for us to be able to do this in person, to sit with each other both in heartbreak and joy or in disappointment or in anger or rage. And so some of the work that I've gotten to do-- and the whole space, as you mentioned, like with after the murder of Jamar Clark and subsequently so many others, Philando Castile, and the most recently, George Floyd.

The thing is that we carry so much of this stuff in our body. It gets trapped both physically and emotionally and in our minds. And we have things that are in our minds that we got to let out. And there are things that we need to say to people.

But we have to have a container by which-- and some agreed-upon ways to be engaged with each other that are going to be about mutual respect, that are going to be about getting to hear what others-- I call this listening for liberation, right? And I do this process where it brings people together, but everybody knows that they're going to actually get an opportunity to be heard and not be interrupted.

And so you can't always do that in a large group. For every-- let's just say you might get five or six people who were able to talk. But we really try to set up a process where people get one-on-one time to be heard.

And people are always so surprised that they may get randomly paired with someone who they maybe never have seen ever in their life. But they, in that short 2 to 5 minutes, they are able to share, here's what's actually on my heart. Oftentimes, people may cry. They may shake. They may laugh. And they're like, wait a minute. I didn't even know this person.

And so I use this as an example because oftentimes, people think, oh, I can't get this stuff out. People don't know me. I'm going to need a long time. But really, what we need is this agreement that everyone is amazing, awesome, and brilliant.

And if we can hold that-- I actually put that out as a direction. I say, hey. You're going to listen to someone. And all you have to do is remember that the person that you're listening to is amazing, awesome, and brilliant, no matter what they're saying. And don't get confused. And people are able to hold that. And it allows people to be able to actually get off of their minds what they've been holding.

CATHY I love that. I love that. How can people create their own respectful, safe containers in their own circles?

WURZER:

JOI LEWIS: Yeah, thanks for that. I often tell people, and people will know, whether I'm leading a group of 1,000 people, or 100, or 15, and I try to share these tools and practices to say they are not simply embodied in me. These are things that people can use. And I said, you can teach people how to treat you. So you can teach people how to listen to you, right?

So you can-- I invite everybody who's listening to try this practice and to-- whether-- you can try it with your spouse, your partner, your children, your coworkers, and say, would you mind listening to me for a minute and a half? And can you remember while you're listening to me that I'm amazing, I'm awesome, and I'm brilliant?

And it may feel a little awkward at first, but it's OK. And say, you know what? I'll set a timer, and then we can switch. And I'll listen to you. You would be amazed. And I'm going to tell you, particularly young people, kids, they love this. But just even coworkers and folks who have had the-- I've had the privilege of getting to sit in space with them, it really works.

And so what does it do? It seems like, OK, this is a silly exercise. But it's not. It is so many things that are in our heads that tell us this-- OK, people are not on my team. They're out to get me. I feel bad about this. So we have to be ridiculous in the other direction and begin to say these positive affirmations about ourselves and about each other so we can actually listen and not be so much in a rush to be like, let me get my point in, if that makes sense.

CATHY Oh, it does, yes. So-- I understand what you're saying. Thank you for that. Say, can we end with a meditation practice? Because we haven't done that, the two of us, for a little bit here. So can you just pick something that you like?

JOI LEWIS: Yes. As we've been talking, it's like, OK, all of these tough things are happening, and things are going on. So I like to set things up where I'm not just dependent on some kind of emergency response. So the practice that we're going to do today is called building your energy bank.

Now, what I need you to do is either grab a sheet of paper or just simply-- I love doing this-- just take your phone and just open the notes section of your phone. And at the top, put "energy bank," OK? And then you're going to write the word "deposits" and put "1, 2, 3." And then under that, you're going to put "withdrawals."

So just think about this as like you're building your own bank account, but it's an energy bank account. So on number one, here's what I'd like for you to do. Write down the first names of three people that when you spend time with them, you feel amazing, awesome, and brilliant. Now, don't worry, Cathy. I'm not going to have you-- you're not going to have to tell me what you wrote down. So this is--

CATHY OK, good.

WURZER:

JOI LEWIS: --just for you, OK? So write down three people. Now, listen. I don't want anybody on the list that you feel obligated to put down. This is your list. Be selfish. Not like, well, I really should have my friend, or my partner, or-- no, no, no. Put down your three people, OK? You got that?

CATHY Mhm.

WURZER:

JOI LEWIS: OK. Number two, I want you to write down three activities that when you do them, they make you feel amazing, awesome, and brilliant. Same rule. You cannot put down things that you feel obligated, that, well, maybe I should put my job down-- no, no, no, no, no. If it doesn't make you feel amazing, awesome, brilliant, don't put it on your list. OK?

All right. Now, don't worry about if you're not getting through all of this, because you can go back and you can do it in a longer way. But for now, this is fine. OK, number three, write down your favorite song. You can write down two if you're battling it. But like, your song-- but here's the caveat. I want you to write down a song that is your jam, that makes you move, that makes you want to get up and dance, that song.

CATHY Mhm.

WURZER:

JOI LEWIS: OK? Oh, you got-- you're like, it's easy. I might ask you about that one. OK.

[LAUGHTER]

OK. Now with the song, I'm going to give you a little tip to go back and do when you have a little bit of time. I want you to actually-- on the note section of your phone, I want you to go to YouTube. And I want you to grab that song, you know, where it says Share, and it gives you the link. And I want you to put it on your note section of your phone. And I want the top to be like, "my song," "my jam," OK? And I'll come back to why I want you to do that.

OK. Now we're at the withdrawals. I want you to write down three people that when you spend time with them, you feel drained, agitated, and exhausted. I promise, I'm not going to ask you to tell me those names, OK? But just write down those three--

CATHY But wouldn't it be fun to call them out on the air? No, I'm just kidding, just kidding.

WURZER:

JOI LEWIS: [LAUGHS] No, no.

CATHY Kidding, kidding, kidding.

WURZER:

JOI LEWIS: I'm not going to ask. OK, OK. But here's the thing. This is the trick about this list. I don't want you to put anybody on your list that is optional that you spend time with them. I want you to put down three people that for better or worse, you have to spend time with them.

I also want you to know that a withdrawal is not a negative thing. If you go to the bank and you need to get something, a necessity-- you need to get new tires or something, and they're going to cost you \$500, if you got \$3,000 in the bank, that's fine. You just withdraw the \$500.

But the problem is if you need to withdraw \$500, and you've got \$100 in there. Now we're in trouble because then you're writing bad checks. And what I want you to know is that even with our energy, we often are out here writing bad checks because we don't have enough deposits. Make sense?

CATHY Mhm.

WURZER:

JOI LEWIS: So number two, I want you to write down three activities that when you spend time doing them, you feel drained, agitated, or exhausted, OK? And again, I don't want this to be optional, because let me free you real quick. If it's optional, don't do it, OK? And you can say, Dr. Joi said I don't have to do that anymore. Yeah, stop doing it because it's optional.

And now the last one is, I want you to write down three sounds that when you hear them, ugh, they make you feel drained, agitated, or exhausted. And people are like, sounds? What do you mean? I mean, it could be anything. It could be-- maybe it's your alarm clock that's going to-- maybe it's when your phone rings. And these are not optional things. But there are some options you have, right?

OK, so I know we're moving quickly, but you should have your energy bank all worked out, right? Here's the thing. If you on a consistent basis spend some time putting those deposits in, when withdrawals happen-- because withdrawals are going to happen, y'all, probably every day-- you have enough stored up in your energy bank that it's OK.

And it also is like, if you're not sure, like, why am I feeling so exhausted? I got a good night's sleep last night, I ate well, but gosh, I feel so exhausted. You can now pull out this list that you have and be like, have I spent enough time on these deposits?

If you did it on a sheet of paper, I want you to take a picture of it. And I want you to then upload it to the note section of your phone so you can quickly check your account any time that you need to, right? We just don't want to be out here writing bad checks. Is that fair?

CATHY That is absolutely fair, yes. Exactly. That was a fun exercise. Oh my gosh. When you start thinking about things, you realize, oh, we do a lot of things out of obligation. You just plow through it, you know? And I can see where that's why a lot of people just-- sometimes, you just get to that point and you're like, I'm out of here. I'm going to withdraw. I'm just going to--

JOI LEWIS: Right, I don't want to do anything. The last thing that I want to-- just as a bonus, is that that list of the three people that you have on there that-- or folks who make you feel amazing, awesome, and brilliant? Before the end of the day, I want to encourage you to send them a text or call them and say, hey, I did this exercise today. And I was asked who are the three people that make me feel amazing, awesome, and brilliant. You were on my list.

Can you imagine what that would be like to get that kind of text from somebody? Make somebody's day. And make your own day as well.

CATHY I love that. That is so fantastic. Thank you.

WURZER:

JOI LEWIS: Yes, you're so welcome.