

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Movement as healing with Dr. Joi and DejaJoelle 01G5MAAB1XTV56CJ3W32ZGNZW4

CATHY WURZER: Let's talk next about the word conjure. It means to make something appear, almost like it was magic. Today, my regular Wednesday guest, Dr. Joi, is here talking with a woman who uses dance and other movement to conjure the best possible outcome.

Dr. Joi is a community healer, speaker, and author of the book *Healing-- The Act of Radical Self-Care*, and founder of Joi Unlimited and the Healing Justice Foundation. And today, she's speaking with Twin Cities-based dancer and healer, DejaJoelle.

JOI LEWIS: Thanks so much, Cathy. Glad to be back on this Wednesday. And yes, I am talking with the brilliant and amazing DejaJoelle today. DejaJoelle is a healing artist, dancer, choreographer, and the founder of Body Prayers, and is also an amazing meditation leader. I wanted to ask DejaJoelle how to find peace and stillness when everything is basically a hot mess. That's my expert opinion. So welcome, welcome, DejaJoelle. How are you?

DEJAJOELLE: Thank you. I'm well. I feel full today. Thank you for asking. How are you?

JOI LEWIS: I'm good. I'm good, especially now that I'm getting to share space with you.

DEJAJOELLE: Yeah.

JOI LEWIS: I'm just going to jump right in, DejaJoelle, because I just want people to just get all the goodness. I'm going to jump right in.

DEJAJOELLE: Let's do it.

JOI LEWIS: Can you share with me, how did you find dance as an antidote or a salve for trauma and harm?

DEJAJOELLE: Hmm.

JOI LEWIS: I'm just going right there.

DEJAJOELLE: Let's just go. Let's just go. Well, as you know, in Black community, dance is ritualistic. It is traditional. It is what we do at church to connect to a higher being, what we do at a family reunion to connect with each other and to say, hey, I ain't seen you in a minute. The Electric Side, the Boogaloo, popping and locking, that's what we do.

JOI LEWIS: Yes.

DEJAJOELLE: And I've been dancing since the age of three, but I didn't think of it as anything special. I thought of it as, that's Sue's daughter, chunky little daughter. She know how to dance, do that dance that you do. When I was 14, I experienced sex trafficking and exploitation.

JOI LEWIS: Mm-hmm.

DEJAJOELLE: And I was confused because I didn't understand how my body could be abused in this way but be used in this way for dance. I couldn't believe that the same body that was being mishandled is the same body that could be beautifully aligned and be polyrhythmic. And then it came to me. And you know what? I probably shouldn't say it came to me. It probably was already there and I was confused.

JOI LEWIS: Mm.

DEJAJOELLE: I was very confused and I didn't know what I was looking for. But recognizing that dance was actually the key to my liberation, dance was actually-- how else am I going to cure or salve this part of my body that was mishandled if I'm not using it and talking to it?

JOI LEWIS: Wow. I want to just pause because that is such a clear example of where both trauma and joy was taking place, right? I'm interested in the difference between sort of dance and meditation and how this shows up in your work, particularly with your work around Body Prayers.

DEJAJOELLE: So dance is meditation in movement or movement in meditation. Yeah. There is a type of hum when it comes to dancing.

JOI LEWIS: So it's like being mindful, like when you're being mindful with the movement. So I may just, like-- oh, I'll just throw my hand, but we can use these moments to stop and pause. And it's like, what am I actually doing here with my hand? So I'm interested in this idea of Body Prayers.

DEJAJOELLE: Yeah, absolutely. How I landed on the name Body Prayers is I'm like, when I'm dancing, it is a ritual. I am praying for something. I am asking for something. Right? So in Body Prayers, we use meditation, ASL, American Sign Language, dance, breathwork, and revolutionary love practices to ask for liberation, bring forth rest, healing, and love.

JOI LEWIS: Yeah. Now, I'm interested, particularly for our listeners who are like, well, I'm not a dancer. I can't do this. You know? This isn't how I-- how have you used this with folks who maybe don't think of themselves as dancers?

DEJAJOELLE: Yeah. So for those who do not see themselves as dancers, I do offer a little bit of movement-- and Dr. Joi, you're very familiar with this-- which is putting your hand over your heart.

JOI LEWIS: Yes.

DEJAJOELLE: If you take three times a day to put your hand over your heart and just allow your heart to rest from all the pain, all the hurt, all the work, you allow to feel what your love feels like to others. Sometimes we don't feel that. And it's like, oh, it's me. And that also can be transferred to other parts of your body. Inhale-- inhaling, grabbing that part of your body, grabbing that tension. And then exhaling, releasing it from your body.

So that's one part of movement or dance that is accessible. And another form of that is revolutionary love practices, and one of those practices is the garden. The garden, for me, is a locator of where you are in relationship to depression or being your not-true self. This tool is amazing. Can I share it with you?

JOI LEWIS: Please.

DEJAJOELLE: OK. So there's many locations in the garden or elements in this tool. And the first element is your home. So your home is where you feel your most authentic self, where you can sling your bra off when you get home.

[LAUGHTER]

JOI LEWIS: Yes.

DEJAJOELLE: Sling it off.

JOI LEWIS: That was a vision.

DEJAJOELLE: You know?

JOI LEWIS: That was a vision. Yes.

DEJAJOELLE: It's like, get it off me. Right?

JOI LEWIS: Yes.

DEJAJOELLE: You feel comfortable. You feel loved. My home feels secure. It feels confident. It feels safe. It feels warm. And it looks like me talking to friends. It looks like me cooking home-cooked meals for myself. You know?

And then the second component is the yard. And if you're in the yard, you're in a place of safely exploring. Right? When you go out to your yard to barbecue, you know you're in the safety of your home, but you're doing something outside. Right? And that is like taking on a new hobby. Maybe you're dating, wearing more colors, or you decided to cut your hair and you're like, I'm exploring, but I'm safe because I feel my home nearby.

JOI LEWIS: Right.

DEJAJOELLE: The third component is the fence, and this is where a lot of people are. This is where you are literally at the boundary of falling into depression. And sometimes we bring ourselves to that fence because we believe we're doing the right thing. We're lying to ourselves in a way. So for example, if I don't necessarily like my job, I may not show up on time. I may call in all the time.

JOI LEWIS: This is so good. Yeah, notice if you're at the fence. This is good.

DEJAJOELLE: Notice if you're at the fence.

JOI LEWIS: Notice if you're at the fence, yeah.

DEJAJOELLE: And you stay there and you try to call people and rally people to come along with you and say, oh, I can't believe she sent me this email. I can't-- blah, blah, blah. Well, it's really because she always sends emails like that, but you're on the fence about the job. So now you're trying to rally people to validate.

JOI LEWIS: And it's not a place of judgment, but just notice.

DEJAJOELLE: Oh, not at all.

JOI LEWIS: Right?

DEJAJOELLE: Mm-hmm.

JOI LEWIS: Right? Yeah.

DEJAJOELLE: Just to notice that when you are at the cusp of your limit, where you're uncomfortable, you're feeling far away from home, and you try to rally other people to validate your location. Yeah. And then I get fired, and then I'm able to blame someone else for falling over the fence.

JOI LEWIS: Right, look what happened.

DEJAJOELLE: Oh, my god. The world is against me. I did everything I could. Remember, I did call you, friend, and told you how they were doing me at the job. It's like, no, you were on the fence.

JOI LEWIS: It's really helpful for you to put out there that maybe we might be on the fence.

DEJAJOELLE: And you feel more comfortable being on the fence when other people are over there with you, because it creates an illusion that you're in your home and that you're right and that you're confident in that. I know what's right and they don't know what's right. Right? We're good and they're not. Right? The us and them.

An alternative to falling over the fence is taking the gate, recognizing that you're on the fence about something and making an intentional and deliberate decision to change. Right? And so, instead of saying, I'm calling in sick, I'm going to say, I'm not happy at this job. And so I'm going to do the best that I can as I'm looking for other jobs, and I have a date set in mind to put in my two-week notice. That is taking the gate.

JOI LEWIS: That's it That's it.

DEJAJOELLE: That is taking control. That is saying, I hold the power to shift my life, and I have the choice to do so.

JOI LEWIS: Yeah, you know, just to notice. We started-- we were talking about movement and physical movement and dance as a part of it. People always think that conscious movement is only about physical movement.

DEJAJOELLE: Mm-hmm.

JOI LEWIS: But what I hear you saying is that it also is about decisions that we make and how we get to move through things like, OK, there's a gate. You've been on the fence, but there is a gate.

DEJAJOELLE: And yes. So after you leave the gate, there's the journey. You're allowed to pack yourself a bag.

JOI LEWIS: Right.

DEJAJOELLE: So you're walking into the unknown, but you have a sense of home inside of you. So when I'm in crisis and I can't think, I know that I can place my hand over my heart, take three inhales and exhales. I give thanks for my exact position where I am right now, and then I move forward.

JOI LEWIS: That is so wonderful. I mean, we got so many little lessons just going through, and I'm so excited. DejaJoelle, thank you so much for--

DEJAJOELLE: Absolutely.

JOI LEWIS: --all that you have gifted and shared with us today.

DEJAJOELLE: Peace.

CATHY WURZER: Thank you to Dr. Joi Lewis and DejaJoelle. Dr. Joi is a community healer, speaker, and author. She was talking with Twin Cities-based dancer and healer, DejaJoelle. Their conversation was edited for time, but there is a longer version of that conversation on our website that includes a really beautiful meditation. That's at mprnews.org.