“Staying Well at UNO”
Episode 4

Episode Description:

UNO Vice Chancellor for Student Success Dan Shipp and UNO Dean of Students Cathy Pettid are joined by Steven Wengel, UNO & UNMC's Assistant Vice Chancellor for Campus Wellness, to discuss resilience in times of prolonged stress.

Transcript:

Well, hello Dan Shipp. Welcome back to Staying Well at UNO, our weekly conversation about staying well and staying sane in the era on COVID-19. How are you doing?
Doing great, thank you. So, okay Cathy I’m going to bring it right away-
Oh no, okay.

So, this is a rough time, right? So, we’re all spending a lot of time at home, looking through- maybe some boxes in the garage, maybe a room or two in our house or apartment that we’re trying to organize, and I found some of my old albums. So, these are actual vinyl right-

Oh okay, collector’s items.

Well, maybe. Maybe it tells a little bit too much about us but, I want to share with you one of my very favorite albums that I keep in this collection. It’s Sammy Davis Jr.- the rat pack- and this was one of our very favorite songs you know, how they’re talking about candy man.

Candy man, yes.

So my challenge to you through channeling Sammy Davis Jr. is for you to find an unearthed- one of your very favorite albums, cassette tape, reel-to-reels or 8-track tape.

Well, I will try and find something cooler than Sammy Davis Jr. because I can guarantee you that we’ve just lost all of the students listening. What are you talking about? This is- so, for students who are listening, I promise to come up with something much more cool next week because in general, I am more cool than Dan Shipp, so.

And this is what those old things used to look like, right? You know, vinyl is cool again, Cathy.
I know, I know, everything old is new again, that’s so cool.

That’s your challenge. That is kind of my fun story though, right? There’s so many things, areas in our homes that we’re discovering that we had maybe blocked out of our mind and now we’re finding interest again.

Yeah, I mean there are benefits to this. You know, speaking of challenges, one of the challenges that I said we’d hold each other accountable for was kind of paying attention to our stress in the last week and recognizing that all stress is not bad, and that it helps us to find motivation so, what insights did you have about that this week, Dan? It’s, you know, this will sound kind of fun but my enjoyment around putting Lego’s together. You know thinking about what are those things that can take your mind off the moment or maybe the headaches or heartaches that you have and give yourself kind of all to the moment of something that interest you. So, some people color, right, some people will do yoga, some people put things together. And so, my son Oliver and I have begun a pretty amazing Lego project that is taking up our ping pong table and its fun for us, I’m remembering how much I liked to get lost in the moment so, what about you? That’s awesome. Yeah, same thing. I really paid attention to my stress and recognized that you know, I needed to channel it a little but more, so I talked to people about good habits all the time but sometimes you don’t do them yourself. So, I started journaling again and setting some- in some cases, half day goals for myself, not even weekly goals, just what do I want to get done by noon, to kind of keep myself motivated- simple things. But, you know, when we’re talking about stress, Dan, and the concept that it’s important to recognize the bad and the good stress in our lives. What it’s really talking about is resiliency and the human’s ability to fight through difficult times and one thing we’ve learned from allowing ourselves to just experience stress is also discover that we have coping strategies, and that we have the ability to work through difficult times. You know, a little bit more of a more serious twist on this, but when I was still a therapist full time, I worked with quite a few people who had gone through significant trauma and that was one of my areas of specialty. I’ve learned that it’s really important for some people to tell their story, the narrative of it. But then quickly pivot to- and tell me what you did to get you to this point because despite all those terrible things happening to you, you’re here, you’re talking to me, you’re at the university. There a lot of things you did right to get to this point, and you could sometimes see the lightbulb moment in people because you know, when you see yourself s only s victim and nothing else, sometimes it’s really easy to forget that you in fact have strength. And I’m not discounting how terrible some things are that happen to people but what I’m trying to convey is, experiencing stress and recognizing the coping strategies that we use, can really be an empowering, healthy thing. And certainly right now, many of us are dealing with feelings of fear, and being scared during this time of COVID-19-n worrying about family members, so it’s relying on- when did I last experience a tough time? What did I do to get through that tough time? And what strategies can I use now? So, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about that.
I love that. That's such great advice, Cathy. You know, maybe something you had said a couple weeks ago that has stuck with me outside of our show was, talking about the idea of everyday thinking of 3 blessings or- gratitude- yeah, gratitude, and it was- I was on a walk with just a podcast in and listening to a Nike trainer talk about that and it came up, the same thing, so I think there’s always some- the universe conspires to teach you lessons and that’s a really good reminder, so I’ve tried to do that, right every day. It could be that my stove keeps working, that could be one of the things, getting a little bit better sleep and it seems like everybody in our immediate family is healthy right now, so I think we shouldn’t discount that, give that some good positive energy and every time I do that I feel a little bit better, so I think there’s something to that so thanks for sharing.

Yeah, and you know, it’s okay also to borrow from other people’s gratitude and other people’s resilience. There have certainly been times in my own life when it’s hard to dig deep and find that, and so many times we can find inspiration from others. And I just thought I’d share with our listeners today, two books that have made a huge difference, not only in how I approach my own personal life, but also how I approach mental wellbeing and that’s really a topic we’re talking about today- whether it’s gratitude, resilience, it’s mental wellbeing, emotional wellbeing- and both of these really have to deal with that concept of resilience. One is called “Man’s Search for Meaning” by Victor Frankl and another one is “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” and both of them essentially- to boil it down, is that concept that yeah, really crappy things can happen and we lose our sense of control, but we can always choose our attitude. And so, thinking and drawing upon other people’s words of wisdom, folks who have gone before us and had difficult experiences, can help us in these challenging times that we have.

I think about that, you and I both share- our fathers were in the military and it’s these times that make me think back to some of the sacrifices that were made. I shared with you that my father was a tail gunner in World War II, and I’ve never really been able to get my head around what that would’ve been like and how you probably didn’t think you were going to make it through and some of that positive thinking that he must’ve had to keep in mind, just to make it through every day, every mission. So, I think that positive attitude can really be a little bit of a light in dark times for sure.

Right, and it’s important to remember that we’re not talking about being a Pollyanna, we’re not talking about ignoring the pain and suffering that many people around the world are experiencing right now, but it’s a sense of, I can dwell on that, or I can try and identify a way that I can move forward for myself and for others and it’s- we can move forward in imperfect ways but we can do that together and it starts with small things. So for our students, and faculty, and staff who are listening, look for pieces of inspiration in your own life- and it doesn’t have to be non-fiction books, it can be fiction as well-stories, characters dreamed up by amazing authors. We have someone very special
joining us today, and that’s our friend and colleague, Dr. Steve Wengel and Steve is a
geriatric psychiatrist- Hi Steve, at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and he is
our assistant vice chancellor of wellness at UNO and UNMC. And one of the great tie-
ins we have today- because Steve, I don’t know if you’ve read this but- I feel like I’m a
publicist today but I thought- yeah, Cathy Pettid’s book club, rivalry of Oprah soon. No
but, in this story it’s simply about the process of aging and how as we age, we tend to
lose some of our independence and control and how we do that gracefully and how we
find new meaning in aging, and that’s really a lot of what you do as a professional
geriatric psychiatrist so, for a lot of reasons we’re excited to have you with us today.
Delighted to be here, thanks so much for this opportunity, and I was thinking, I was
making notes to myself as you’re talking, I kept nodding my head, you couldn’t see
me because I was muted but I kept saying wow, that’s great, it’s really so cool what
you’re saying. I was just thinking, I really liked everything you both said but one thing
you know, I kind of put a star by in my notes, was that notion of resilience and kind of
tapping into our previous experience of- gosh you know, what tough thing have you
been through before and how you got through that, because you’re right, everybody
and the sound of our voice, has been through tough stuff, you wouldn’t of have made it to
UNO and gotten admitted and been successful up to this point without having gotten
through some tough times but we forget that sometimes, you know. So, that tied into my
work as a geriatric psychiatrist. One of the reasons is- why did you go into that? It’s not
a sexy area of medicine some people say you know, or whatever, I love it though
because I get paid to talk to older adults and listen to their stories and you know, think
about that. If you’re 80, 85, or today I saw a 100-year-old person, that’s not that unusual
and I’ll talk to people in their late 90’s or over 100 and you think about what that person
has lived through. Just historically, the Cold war, maybe World War II, you know etc., so
in some ways my job is easy, if they’re going through a tough time I can just simply tap
into that and say okay, yeah this is a tough time, what other tough time of dozen tough
times have you lived through before and how did you do that? So I was thinking you
know, this ties into another one of our friends, Julie Masters, she and I did a-
she runs the gerontology department at UNO, she and I did an interview over there last week and
we called it the Wisdom of Elders. What can older adults teach us in these difficult
times? I think you know, having that conversation with that person that might be pretty
lonely because they are in a nursing home or they are sheltered in their house-
whatever, but tapping into that and saying, gosh you know, we could really use your
expertise now, how would you help- what can you tell us about your past experiences,
might help us kind of weather the storm a little bit. A two-way street, It helps everybody.
I love that connection, Steve. Talk to us a little bit you know, we’re kind of lucky because
we get to chat on a routine basis but you’re able to share- I believe you call it the 4 r’s,
right? -or resilience. Maybe talk to us a little bit, how that connects for folks.
Yeah, so you know, I always tell people in full disclosure, I’m not a terribly creative
person but I’m pretty good at stealing good ideas and so, one of my psychologist friends
used to always talk about it- I think he called it the 3 r’s, I just added one so- I’m 33
percent better I guess but, 4 r’s. So I like to think of you know, relationships- obviously
really, really critically important and like now, we’re doing a zoom thing instead of
maybe some other face-to-face meeting, but you know, we’re making it work but keeping those relationships strong. Maybe reaching out to friends and family we haven’t connected with in a while, that’s one of the- incidentally, one of the silver linings in this cloud, is that I think we’re connecting with people that maybe we, maybe lost connection with. So relationships I think are really, really important- routines you know, and people have heard this by now, it’s probably old news but just, you know, get up and you know, take a shower, do the stuff you normally would do- we’re a little more casual now maybe in the terms of the way we dress and things like that but still, getting dressed on the morning is king of a good thing, making you bed you know, little things like that- exercise, getting enough sleep you know, those sort of things. Basic stuff, but sometimes the basics we kind of forget about.

Steve, are you trying to make me feel bad for not wearing a tie?

Well, you know, I was going to say something you know but no- well as you can see, I have spent 30 years of my life feeling guilty if I didn’t wear a tie every day and that’s kind of one of the other unintended positives of this and I don’t feel to guilty, and you can see it but I’m not wearing dress shoes anymore, I’m wearing comfortable sneakers so-

I love it! You rebel!

So you know, anyway let’s see- routines, and then the other two are relaxation- I teach a lot of people like my medical students, my patients- whatever, how to do a real simple meditation thing and I think that’s really helpful- I’ve been doing it since I was a stressed out undergrad at UNO and UNL many years ago and it works for me and it works for a lot of folks. And then, reflection. So, you both talked about gratitude and journaling and sometimes I put those two together and as you know, some people- myself included, will keep a formal sort of gratitude journal where once or twice a week, of course some people do it every day, write down a couple 3 things that you’re grateful for. I would say there’s- the journaling thing is really something I’m trying to learn more about, there’s actually a neuroscience to that, when you write down your feelings or thoughts, it really helps you. It’s different than just thinking about things, thinking and talking is good but writing in some ways is pretty healing also.

Yeah, Steve, I love that and you know, I mentioned that I personally do that but it’s not easy, and in the beginning I would actually set a timer on my phone and not let my pen leave the paper for- I would try for 3 minutes and then I upped it to 5 minutes and sometimes I just wrote, I don’t know what to write. You keep doing that and suddenly the ideas start flowing. You know, students can do that for papers and thesis ideas, but also just in terms of how they are feeling.

That’s great, I like that, kind of priming the pump you know, you’re right- writing is hard. I find writing really hard you know, but I think you’re right, just sometimes the secret is
just- yeah writing something even like- I love that, I don’t know what to write, that’s a legitimate thing to write.

It’s like anything, it’s muscle memory so you need to flex your writing muscle and encourage yourself just to keep going and I always love what comes out of that.

Yeah, absolutely.

I’m going to remember that Cathy, on the quality and content of your emails from now on. I’m going to send you reminders on- nope, go back to the drawing board, let’s work on a little bit more there. So Steve, help us understand- what’s your you know, from a wellness perspective and you background and the things that you see and hear daily, what’s your big take on COVID-19 and how people are grappling with this reality and maybe a tip about how to help folks navigate these difficult times.

Yeah, you know, I keep trying to figure out- and I think we are all trying to make sense of this you know, because that’s one thing human beings always try to do- try to make sense of the world, when right now, the world doesn’t always make a lot of sense and I keep trying to think, how do you tie a lot of stuff together and again, I didn’t come up with this idea, I just read it from someone else but somebody- a really thoughtful piece I read recently, talked about grief. It was kind of one of the unifying principles for right now. I was just talking with one of my colleagues who’s a nurse and she has a daughter who was a cheerleader, but couldn’t do what she normally would do at the end of the season because- we’re all grieving something, sometimes, it’s actually losing a loved one, but even if it’s not that- most of the time it’s not that, thankfully but we’re all grieving something that we didn’t get to do- that commencement that yes we doing, like UNO and UNMC, we’re doing it virtually, they’ll be good- they will be good commencement ceremonies, they will be different commencement ceremonies than normal. So sometimes that’s a bit of a grief kind of thing and that’s okay. You know, that’s a part of being human, we will grieve things any time you’re attached to something and it’s either temporarily or permanently taken away, you’re going to go through grief, that’s okay. And I think that’s part of it, just saying it’s okay to not always feel okay right now because we are all in that boat- mental health professionals alike, we all are kind of feeling a little you know, a little different and that’s okay, this won’t last forever and we will all learn some things about ourselves out of this I think, we already are, and again like you said Cathy- we’re not pollyanna-ish about it, it’s you know, these are tough times but tough times make you stronger and they teach you some things.

Our guiding principle in the first couple weeks when we were starting to realize how serious this was going to be and that the reality of- my goodness we’re going to have to shut our campus- you know, on campus classes and all those things, that was quite sobering and you know, the best and worst comes out in all of us during stressful times and you know, when the worst comes out, it’s grace and grit, right? You have to give yourself grace, you have to give others grace and then you get over it and you just keep plugging away and I think I’ve really learned that you know, it’s just as important to
forgive yourself if you send an email that you didn’t intend to or give stink eye- Dan, right? Dan always claims that I give him the stink eye and so, I try. But you know, we all are going to have reactions to stress that are sometimes counterproductive. The point is to recognize- you went there, don’t stay there, and move on.

And so, grace and grit has been sort of our mantra during these times.

I like it- memorable and it just kind of cuts to the chase. I’ve been talking about grace, but I hadn’t put those two together quite that way and I like that a lot. Right, yeah grace, so like, going back to what I said- it sounded preachy you know, stay in a routine but you know that’s a good thing in general but it’s okay to deviate from the routine too because we all will and if you don’t take a shower today, cut yourself a little slack, give yourself a little grace.

I like that, I’m going to remember that with our boys around the house-

I was going to say don’t tell the boys that-

There’s no grace for that- they need to get on that shower every day.

You know, Steve, on a serious note, I know that one of your areas of interest, and it’s also one that Dan and I have talked about quite a bit, is the importance of sleep. And, how tough it is right now when our normal routines are so up ended. So, could you talk to our listeners a little bit about sleep and maybe one or two of your suggestions, this is your Dr. Phil moment. You are much wiser than Dr. Phil, so. Dr. Steve’s moments.

Well, that’s real kind. Before I do that- one other thing I forgot to mention before that I just thought I’d share real briefly. My other tip that has nothing to do with my final tip is, on my desk- I don’t know if you can see these two orange things, this is an actual eating orange because I like oranges so that’s usually my lunch, I’ve got an extra one here, and this is an orange stress ball, they’re about the same size. So, my tip is, if you happen to have these two things on your desk, be careful which one you pick up to do the stress thing- pick up the orange and try to do this stress thing, nothing good will come of that-

I thought you were going to juggle for us.

You know that’s- I’m actually doing a YouTube video that- we’re doing a virtual talent show on the UNMC side so we actually do have- I’ll tease you with that one, I did do a juggling trick that will show up I think in a week or two so we’ll put that on our YouTube channel.

Well you know what, Steve, we have to- so we can’t let UNMC one up us so maybe we can figure out, we have some really good partners I think of Bill Pickett and others that could work with you to get a little bit of a talent show going.
Let’s get a little competition, UNMC, UNO, I think it would be fun.

We have thrown it down. Challenge accepted.

All right, throw down with Cathy and Dan, sounds good to me, sounds cool. I’ll accept the challenge. So I’m a- you know, from the sublime to the ridiculous or the other way around I guess, so sleep is kind of one of my big theme songs lately, even before the pandemic. So, you know I’m a psychiatrist, I ask every patient I see about how well they’re sleeping because it goes- you know bad sleep goes along with depression and bipolar disorder and anxiety, we know that but you know it goes the other way too, as it turns out that if we deprive ourselves of sleep because we are doing distracting behaviors- look I do it too, spend too much time internet surfing or gaming, or doing whatever. We all do stuff we need to do to distract ourselves but if you cut into your sleep too much, too often- once in a while it’s okay but if you do it too much, it actually makes you more anxious. A recent study I just saw, they took young adults that don’t have an anxiety disorder and they kind of temporarily sleep deprived them, they cut their sleep by an hour a day, an hour and a half a day- whatever, and they found the next day they feel more anxious. And it’s hard to put your finger on it but you just feel like- not just tired but just actually anxious, so I’m saying one of the things I’m really watching in myself and others around me is just saying, “are you getting enough sleep?” And you know, to finish that thought, I don’t usually like to promote you know, like commercial products but in this case I will. So, I don’t know if you’ve seen those infomercials about these corduroy pillows- yeah, these corduroy pillows are supposed to help you sleep better, yeah they are really making a lot of headlines.

Get it, headlines. Yeah, that’s a really bad joke isn’t it- lines from the corduroy- yeah, no okay. Everyone just groaned collectively who’s listening to this, thanks for that bad dad joke. You know, on a serious note, if you had to identify maybe one or two things that our listeners could do to help fall asleep- without pharmaceutical intervention, what might you suggest?

Yeah, great, thanks for reminding me of that. So there’s a smart phone app that I like a lot, it’s called CBT as in cognitive behavior therapy but CBT-I as in insomnia, CBTI coach, and it is designed to help people with insomnia fall asleep and it’s really, really good, it’s free, it was designed by the veteran’s administration so nobody is trying to sell you anything, really, really good. And even if you don’t have insomnia it’s really good. They have a lot of guided meditations if you just kind of want to chill out you can listen to a soothing voice walk you through that. I think that’s really good. They’ve done a lot of research with that form of therapy as you know and they found it’s actually more effective than sleeping pills and of course not habit forming, no side effects so I really believe in that. I mentioned before, I personally do some meditation and that helps me. I do it before sleep- it’s just my, it’s just a different brand of the same thing basically but just kind of calming your thoughts down. I would say the other quick tip is getting away
from screen time for maybe a half hour or an hour before bed helps a lot. It kind of wakes you up, the blue light and the stimulation so, getting away from the screens a little bit and again, I don’t always practice that myself but nobody’s perfect. I love that advice too- yeah, we’ve been talking a little bit about that. That seems to come up as a shared piece of advice. It’s not easy to do but it’s so quick for people to just look at their phones before they go to bed, I actually find it liberating, I like putting it away, yeah I can kind of go to a point of relaxation then so, that’s good advice.

Well Dr. Wengel, thank you for joining us on the Cathy and Dan show, notice Cathy gets top billing, but we really believe in staying well at UNO and you’re a big part of helping us think through and make that work for our students, faculty, and staff. So, thank you Dr. Wengel for joining us.

Thank you so much. It’s been a delight.

All right, take care.

Well, Dan, we have some challenges that are going to come up for us next week, each one of us are going to- yes, bring our new album. I know, I’m going to have to think hard about this. But we also again, would love to hear from our listeners about the different kinds of topics they’d like us to discuss. Send those ideas and suggestions into stayingwell@unomaha.edu, we want to continue coming to you weekly with relevant and helpful information. We’re going into the summer months and school will continue to be offered online and we will continue to offer student services and support services for our students and this webinar is just one small part of that. So, what else would you have to add, Dan, before we sign off?

You know, the only thing I would say is that the weather seems to be picking up a little bit better, right? Better forecast so, I would encourage all of our viewers, listeners, to get outside, go for a walk, clear your head, give yourself a little time to enjoy what spring is like in Nebraska. So, if you can find the time please, take advantage of getting outside. Well said. All right well, until next week, Dan, take care.

Bye Cathy, bye.