

TRANSCRIPT S2E4 – Medical Moments
VIRAL AWAKENING: How to stay spiritually, mentally fit during COVID-19 lockdown
April 6, 2020

[00:00:03.970] - Voice over

Welcome to Medical Moments. I'm your host, Marlon Manuel. Stories of health and wellness and the issues that influence them can be found in hospitals, medical practices and the community at large. Join me on this journey of Medical Moments.

[00:00:20.560] - Marlon Manuel

Welcome back. I'm glad you're listening to Medical Moments. Corona virus disease 2019, which you probably know is COVID-19, has affected nearly all of us, at least a little, especially our mental wellbeing. We're stressed by working too much or not working at all.

[00:00:40.850] - Marlon Manuel

We've been told to keep our distance from friends, neighbors and family so we can all stay well. The curve is flattening in some places, but it's taking a mental toll. The Pew Research Center reports that more of us are feeling uncomfortable going out to shop or eat or even vote in large crowds. In a recent Pew Research survey said that more than half of us - 55 percent - have prayed for an end to the pandemic. And that includes groups of people who say they seldom pray.

[00:01:10.400] - Marlon Manuel

Amidst the isolation, how do we maintain our mental health? How do we nourish our spiritual life and how do we maintain our hope? I asked that of my guests who join me on the phone. - Amani Legagenur, manager of spiritual health and education for the Northside Hospital Health System; and Nikeisha Whatley-Leon, a licensed clinical psychotherapist and the director for behavioral services for the Northside Hospital Health System.

[00:01:36.950] - Marlon Manuel

Amani and Nicki should thank you so much for joining the program today.

[00:01:40.670] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

Thank you for having us.

[00:01:41.450] - Amani Legagneur

Thank you for having us.

[00:01:42.690] - Marlon Manuel

You know, in this time of sheltering in place self-isolation, you know, people talk about going stir crazy or having cabin fever. You know, we're social distancing and there are other forms of isolation. So let's start there. Is there really such a thing as is being stir crazy?

[00:02:00.350] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

Oh, definitely. I think that what people say, what is their crazy? I think that, you know, anything that makes us psychologically disturbed right when is by way of being confined or in prison. And I think as a result of being isolated in such a way that COVID has put us in, then it increases the likelihood of us becoming stir crazy. There's a reason why we have confinement in the prison system because is it almost feels punitive and like punishment. Right. So definitely I think that that goes hand-in-hand with cabin fever. I'll let you respond, Amani, if you have anything to add to that.

[00:02:37.990] - Amani Legagneur

Sure. I think from a spiritual perspective, I don't know that I would call it stir-fried so much as to bear. That stems from isolation. It can lead to feelings of anxiety and emotional disturbance, absolutely, which is more Nikeisha's area. What I see among people is just a feeling of being cut off from what are vital resources for them to feel well, to feel violently alive, to feel like they matter to others. I'm particularly

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concerned about our elders, for example, who are told not even to see other family members for folks in the hospital who can't be visited quite as much for their own safety and for the safety of the patient.

[00:03:25.130] - Amani Legagneur

So that kind of craziness of circumstance, that bewilderment that comes when we can't function in the way that we're used to functioning as communal, relational warm-hearted human beings, definitely leads to a different, altered mental and spiritual state.

[00:03:43.350] - Marlon Manuel

And, so this feeling of being cut off, as you said, Amani, this this feeling of isolation that that occurs in people. What's the role of both therapy and spirituality in counteracting that?

[00:03:56.510] - Amani Legagneur

Well, I'll start with spirituality. There is a sense in which and first, you know, I think it's important and helpful to define spirit and spirituality. There is a theologian named Poe Pelke who said the faith is the ultimate concern of people and God is the ground of all being, and so whatever people's religious, their faith tradition, whether they ascribe to some faith, a religion or no faith in particular. Everyone has an ultimate concern. Everyone has some form of spirituality in this band.

[00:04:36.440] - Amani Legagneur

And so what happens when people are isolated and that which matters most to them? For example, if it's connection with other people or community or a job that recently been lost it could be that their ultimate concern is taking care of their family. And they're not able to do that as well if they're not allowed to visit their family members. Spirituality can bring us back to source. It can bring us back to the essence of what matters most, though inside of that desire to let in an ordinary way is a sense of wanting to love people in an extraordinary way.

[00:05:13.970] - Amani Legagneur

And one of the invitations and opportunities at this time, I think spiritually is to get creative about what offering love and care and caretaking can look like.

[00:05:24.880] - Marlon Manuel

Nikeisha, so Amani talks about going back to source, finding truth. What is the what is the mental behavior or mental therapy version of that?

[00:05:34.100] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

Over the years, we've come to a common ground to where we realize that have a spirituality or and religious in the treatment of mental health is a benefit because we know that spirituality allows us to tolerate stress better, generates the sense of peace, like what Amani is saying, purpose and even forgiveness. And I think when you're faced with something so traumatic as this and so unexpected as this, then we're often times trying to figure out how can we find a resolution.

[00:06:03.320] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

And some things are just not meant for us to know the answer to everything for one. And so having a connection and a sense of being able to have faith in something that's larger than us. COVID is larger than us, but we have a lot of <garbled> trouble. And in things that we may not feel like or given us that instant gratification that we're used to. So I think that what when something like this happens, the way that you deal with spirituality and incorporating it into a mental health model is to, one, identify with it needs for you.

[00:06:38.180] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

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What does that look like for you and begin to practice it? You know, I definitely see where we've been able to take leaps and bounds over the years and our feel on how to incorporate that into our treatment planning. And so for everyday people, you know, if you already deal with anxiety or you already dealing with having irrational thoughts or something like COVID hits. And so this is where you pull out your tool box. Look what in my tool box can help give me some sense of peace.

[00:07:07.700] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

What can help me begin to focus on what I do have control over? What can help me begin to come up with some solutions of how to heal our community, how to help my family.

[00:07:18.240] - Marlon Manuel

And you're and you're headed in exactly the direction that I wanted us to talk about, because I think when it comes down to it, you know, people see that there's there's challenging news out there that there's grim outlooks. In some cases, they feel out of control. And I think the central question is, where do we find hope? How do we find hope in all of this? And I think you've started to address some of that, Nikeisha.

[00:07:39.650] - Crosstalk

Yeah, sure. Go ahead. No, go ahead, Nikeisha, I'm sorry. No, no, no, no. You jump in.

[00:07:45.550] - Amani Legagneur

Well, I was reflecting on what a brilliant thing that you just said in terms of helping people to find resources inside of themselves to get back to that peace that is the elixir for the anxiety that they might be feeling. One of the things that I thought of a moment ago, Marlon, is that, in times like this, when we do feel out of control, the desire to fix things get a lot more amplified in our minds than perhaps it does ordinarily.

[00:08:21.280] - Amani Legagneur

And what Nikeisha said that what she began her statement with, which is accepting that we can't change certain circumstances, though we can wash our hands, though we can get social distance, though we can do some things that are really helpful to the collective. In this in this environment of COVID-19 and helpful to the community, at the end of the day, we don't have a way, most of us, of fixing it. And so in light of that, I wonder about the small things that we can do day to day, like feeding ourselves as well as possible, like returning to breath.

[00:08:57.880] - Amani Legagneur

One of the places where spirituality and mental health and behavioral health kind of join in community with each other is in the practice of mindfulness. It comes from a Buddhist root, even though it's a secular model and the reminder that all of us have breath. COVID-19 is a respiratory illness. And when we are working as chaplains in the hospital with people with respiratory, one of the things I find in myself is that I hold my breath. It's like I attuned to what's going on with them and I take on their distress.

[00:09:35.070] - Amani Legagneur

And what's miraculous to use spiritual language, to me is that if I can get back into a normal regular breathing pattern with people who are experiencing anxiety, they will attune to my breath. They'll attune to a place that much more rhythmic, much more spacious, and ultimately helps all of those chemicals that are going on that are causing stress in their brain to relax a little bit and get back to a steady state and a more normal way of thinking and being where their prefrontal cortex comes back online and they can even think more clearly.

[00:10:13.560] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

Right. You know, I think what goes hand-in-hand with that mindfulness is just accepting that we're not in control. Right. And then accepting that our new temporary reality, that life as we've known it has changed

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- and that's okay. You know. I mean, we've been through epidemic epidemics before. Our countries, our families and our economy. We will get through it. And I think that, you know, this is new definitely for our modern times, but many countries have dealt with this. And and we're getting through it all together. And we will. I think that another way to look at it is that is a natural response to the unknown is anxiety in Mother Nature's way of trying to protect us and to find solutions. And I think the way to help cope with that and how to control that is to focus on what we do have control over. And that is remember until last. Like even though we're in this chaotic situation, there are things that are happening that's really funny.

[00:11:11.310] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

And we'll look back on it and we'll be like, remember when we did X, Y and Z, though, we went about all the toilet paper out of the store. You know, so like things like this, finding humor in the things that we're doing when we're thinking that were basically in survivor mode, right? So I think laughing is huge. Laughing Yoga, of course. Like Amani is saying, mindfulness, I think we should be intentional about our social connections, even though we can't meet physically, we need to make sure we're connecting voice to voice.

[00:11:42.130] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

And what really helps is to have that face time. I think it's called face time for a reason because we need that. And we are here as humans not to be here on this earth alone, but we need the sense of connection. There's so much healing and recovery that that comes out of connection. And so I think remembering that and practicing that this, you know, this pandemic has forced us to push the envelope with technology. I think a lot of the Millennials have been you know, they've just kind of jumped into this, this is what they were born into. But, you know, some older adults and some people, even with health care organizations, we've been able to be a little more conservative around how much we use telehealth and things of that sort, telemedicine. But I think that, you know, there is a benefit in it. I think that, you know, of course, taking news breaks. We need to watch the news over and over and over again, because a lot of times they repeat the same story that you saw this morning.

[00:12:39.690] - Marlon Manuel

Right. And do you think do you think that's where a lot of the stress is coming from? People are constantly tuned in to what, where's the latest case and what's the latest breakthrough?

[00:12:49.540] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

Like, do we really need to know that we went from eighty thousand to eighty one thousand, you know, like so, you know, I think that a lot of stress is is brought upon ourselves because we're not setting limits and protecting our own mind and body with some of this information. I think that, you know, too much exposure can be very bad for us. And I think that we have to protect ourselves from being inundated with all of its news, because if you go on social media, it's there, right? You go on the TV, it's there. But I think that we still can't control it in a way that that we were able to turn certain parts of it off and we determine how much time we want to spend with that. We call it a news fast in our field. So I think that that's key in this because too much exposure can be overwhelming and it's just going to acerbate your anxiety.

[00:13:43.190] - Marlon Manuel

Right. And maybe not look at your Twitter feed as often.

[00:13:46.470] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

Right. And not click on every video that you see on Instagram, especially when you can tell that they're about to cry like someone that you just don't need to look at. You know,

[00:13:57.180] - Amani Legagneur

You can also be a dinosaur like me and not have Twitter or Instagram. But I actually get a lot of the news that I hear through reading reliable news sources, because I find that if I watch more than an hour or two

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of news a day it does start to impede on the space inside of me that can stay still and that can find it's peace.

[00:14:26.610] - Amani Legagneur

So I think a news fast, in some ways, that's a good idea. You know, on the other hand, being informed in a way that makes sense to you. Sure. And actually being intentional about that is the great idea. What do you allow into your in your into your head, into your heart during times of trouble? It's one question that I've asked myself and that the chaplains that I work with are repeatedly asked by their patient. For me, sources of beauty, poetry and art, and the laughter of my child, trying to learn how to homeschool her. It has been funny in ways because I don't know what I'm doing.

[00:15:07.700] - Amani Legagneur

I'm very appreciative of teachers who do so. Being able to laugh at yourself, I think it's a great idea. Nikeisha, when you we're talking about the toilet paper, what came to me is something that somebody wrote in my yearbook in middle school and it was the best thing that anybody ever wrote my yearbook. He said, may your life be like toilet paper, long and useful.

[00:15:32.510] - Nikeisha Whatley-Leon

There you go.

[00:15:43.960] - Marlon Manuel

Levity in times of stress often is the best medicine. So is funding sources of strength. Things that matter to you. Things that keep you going. Things that inspire you. Amani Legagneur, in part, finds strength and beauty in words of wisdom. As we concluded our conversation, she shared an example, a poem that acknowledges the suffering and helplessness we feel, but also points out that hope and healing awaits. The birds are singing again. It's about beauty, despite.

[00:16:14.530] - Amani Legagneur

One of the poems that I've been returning to over and over again as a spiritual resource was written by an Irish priest named Father Richard as he reflected on the COVID-19 crisis. And I'd love to share it all with you. It's called lockdown.

[00:16:37.360] - Amani Legagneur

Yes, there is fear. Yes, there is isolation. Yes, there is panic buying. Yes, there is sickness. Yes, there is even death.

[00:16:51.480] - Amani Legagneur

But, they say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise, you can hear the birds again.

[00:16:57.110] - Amani Legagneur

They say that after just a few weeks of quiet, the sky is no longer thick with fumes. But blue and gray and clear. They say that in the streets of Assisi people are speaking to each other across the empty squares, keeping their windows open so that those who are alone may hear the sounds of family around them. They say that a hotel in the west of Ireland is offering free meals and delivery to the household. Today, a young woman I know is busy spreading flyers with her number through the neighborhood so that the elders may have someone to call on.

[00:17:34.030] - Amani Legagneur

Today, churches, synagogues, mosques and temples are preparing to welcome and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary. All over the world, people are slowing down and reflecting all over the world. People are looking at their neighbors in a new way. All over the world, people are waking up to a new reality, to how big we really are, to how little control we really have.

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[00:18:00.590]

To what really matters. To love. So we pray and we remember that, yes, there is fear, but there does not have to be hate. Yes, there is isolation, but there does not have to be loneliness. Yes, there is panic buying, but there does not have to be a meanness. Yes, there is sickness, but there does not have to be a disease of the soul. Yes, there is even death. That there can always be a rebirth of love.

[00:18:32.250] - Amani Legagneur

Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now. Today, breathe. Listen behind the factory noises of your panic. The birds are singing again. The sky is clearing. Spring is coming. And we are always encompassed by love. Open the windows of your soul. And though you may not be able to touch across the empty square, sing.

[00:18:59.200] - Voice over

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[00:19:17.050] - Voice over

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