



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 139: DR. KELLY CRACE – FIVE STRATEGIES TO AVOID COVID BURNOUT

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 help make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. It's been six months since COVID-19 began to change life dramatically in the U.S. and across the world. And as we move into the fall, that change continues, and the amount of uncertainty seems to be growing. Along with it comes ambiguity, disruption, and other elements human beings generally dislike. Well, all of those factors lead to what our guest today calls chronic too-muchness. For many people today, just hanging in, there is a real challenge, but there are ways to not only hang tough but to avoid burnout and to even flourish during the pandemic. Dr. Kelly Crace is a licensed psychologist. He's associate vice president for health and wellness at William and Mary. He's the co-author of Authentic Excellence, Flourishing and Resilience, and a Relentless World. He joins us today to discuss five mindful strategies you can adopt to avoid burnout and thrive during the pandemic. Here's our conversation with Dr. Kelly Crace.

Ken White

Kelly, thank you very much for sharing your time. It's a busy time of the year for you, and you're on campus today.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, it feels good to be on campus and to be able to see the students walk by outside my window and wave at them. It's just a good feeling for the heart and the head.

Ken White

No doubt. Yeah, we really need each other, don't we? We need interaction as human beings.

Dr. Kelly Crace

We do. We do. I mean, I think people have started to find somewhat of a rhythm to working at home and to teleworking. I think they've adapted to it, but I don't know if it's necessarily the preferred scenario. And it certainly rang true for me when I came to campus and realized just what I had missed. And it's a good feeling.

Ken White

As you interact not just in the education space but professionals in all sectors and no matter where they live, are you seeing people that have that are starting to really feel the stress and the inconvenience of coronavirus?

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, I think I think that distinction is stress differentiated from strain. I mean, we can manage challenge. Challenge is actually growth-producing, and we can manage stress if the stress is related to things of purpose or meaning. But if we find that kind of there's this chronic level of demands exceeding capabilities, it can move from stress to strain and strain is unsustainable. And that's what leads to burnout. That's what leads to kind of a deterioration of our energy and our motivation and our resilience. And so I think we are seeing in this chronic uncertainty, this kind of relentless pace because people have commented that they almost they feel more busy than before because they're juggling multiple roles in one space. And that strain and the uncertainty of where this is going. So they're developing plans, not knowing if Plan A is going to turn into plan F, you know, so many iterations, it just wears on us.

Ken White

Yeah. That's the thing I hear from our friends in the corporate space, and across all various sectors is I'll work all week long with my team. We have all this energy, this creativity, and innovation, and we finish it by Friday, and then we learn before we're done Friday scrap that we have things have changed. We have to start over and wearing people down.

Dr. Kelly Crace

It is.

Ken White

Yeah.

Dr. Kelly Crace

We've called this summer the breathless summer because people have not been able to catch their breath. It is felt just ongoing. And now, at a time when we hope most staff and faculty and students come to campus with their tank full, many are coming with their tank

close to empty. And that's worrisome to them that that kind of scares them of am I going to be able to get through this with a with an empty tank?

Ken White

You spoke to our incoming Flex MBA students a few days ago. These are working professionals, people who have great jobs, and lead others, and they're pursuing their MBAs now. And you shared your talk was on five strategies to avoid burnout in this time. And I thought as I'm listening, oh we've got bring Kelly on the podcast to talk about that, would you mind let's talk about that, the five strategies. First of all, you're feeling people are definitely, without question, feeling burned out and tired, as you said.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, these are burnout conditions. So when and some of the work that we did in the research that we were doing around predicting, flourishing and what predicts people to flourish during various conditions, we find that when we're in certain situations that are chronically uncertain but chronically demanding and can be also chronically upsetting. If you can remember, I mean, we're not only in a situation where we're managing pandemic, we're also managing a lot of social unrest around things that are attached to our values. And so people can have a wide range of emotions about these things, and that takes energy. So if that if all of these issues are combined, it creates this scenario of chronic too-muchness that we can step into too much at an acute or temporary level. But when it becomes chronic too-muchness, that's when it starts to move into strain. And if we don't be real intentional, if we're not really mindful about some strategies, we move into kind of a deeper state of burnout. That's pretty serious. And so we found that what do people do that flourish amidst burnout conditions? In other words, they can't change their scenario. They're in conditions that are vulnerable to burnout, and they can't really change that. How do you psychologically manage that? And we found that they are typically intentional and mindful about five key strategies. And that's kind of what we talked about with your group the other day.

Ken White

Yeah. Let's go through those. Your first one was start every day with purpose.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah.

Ken White

What do you mean by that?

Dr. Kelly Crace

It's just very simply the mindful intention of starting every day with what's important to me. What matters to me and of those things, what matters most today, so there's not only a crystallization of what matters, but there's also a prioritization that of these things that I thought about while I'm brushing my teeth in the morning and thinking about what's important to me, what matters to me today, to also kind of rank them, you know, of those things this one is most important. The key is to ask that every day with a clean slate as if you've never asked it before because the answers will be different based on your day. The reason why that one is so important is it differentiates wants from values, from needs. We typically kind of neurologically live according to fear and comfort. We're most motivated by fear and comfort. And what that means is we're then motivated to deal with all the urgent have to's of the day. And then we seek regulation; we seek comfort. And so we will typically start each day with either what do I have to do or what do I want to do. And the problem with that is when it's a want, that's a preference. And what follows from that is not enough psychological commitment to be able to really engage at it at the full level that you want to. So it never takes hold at a consistent level. Conversely, if it's a have to and a need, what brings with that a certain level of psychological intensity that actually gets in the way of your optimal thinking? It gets in the way of critical thinking, creative thinking; it gets in the way of your performance. So if we start the day with needs or if we start the day with wants, it just puts us in a place where we're not functioning at our optimal. The cool thing is the most deepest, purest form of human motivation are our values. So if we trigger our values intentionally at the beginning of the day by saying what's important to me today, what matters to me today, and then owning that, that gives us a sense of resilience because you're acting according to purpose and purpose is a buffer to burnout.

Ken White

Do something every day, that's enjoyable.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, and that was kind of a that was a neat little thing we learned about people that that flourish is they're very intentional about doing something every day that's enjoyable. But it's not in the way we normally think about it. They don't chase happiness. They're not necessarily looking for something to take them away from their stress. They just recognize that amidst these burnout conditions and amidst the hardness and the too-muchness of my life, it is important to pause. It is important things become so quick in an environment of too-muchness and chronic too-muchness. And so things get real quick, which means we're quick to run, we're quick to sprint, we're quick to judge, we're quick to not think, but we act. We need to find a time where we can pause a little bit. And so they do something every day that's enjoyed. It doesn't have to be at a level of high intensity where you just feel chills and goosebumps. It can be something very quiet. It can be the favorite cup of coffee with this favorite person that you do in the morning that you're with every morning.

To be able to kind of just spend that time together can be at the end of the evening, just sitting out on the deck and taking five minutes to look around in nature. Whatever it is, they never took it for granted. That was the key that in their business they didn't busyness. They didn't say; I just don't have time for this. They made time for it. And we found out it mattered. It mattered in terms of providing a restorative moment.

Ken White

It's just like a lot of very successful CEOs, no matter what, get their workout in every day.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Absolutely.

Ken White

It's so critical to their success.

Dr. Kelly Crace

It's absolutely true.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Dr. Kelly Crace in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. In today's environment, business and the world are constantly changing. You can sit on the sidelines and watch it happen, or you can learn the skills needed to lead and influence in this time of disruption and change. An MBA from William & Mary will provide you with the tools you need to succeed in our new world. There are four different MBA formats, including the Full-Time, the Evening or Flex program, the Online, and the Executive. The William & top-ranked Mary MBA and its top-ranked faculty will prepare you to be the kind of leader our new world needs. Now back to our conversation with Dr. Kelly Crace.

Ken White

Give encouragement, seek encouragement.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yeah, that was really interesting in terms of the reciprocal nature of it. It made sense why to avoid burnout, why it's good to have your support system around you, and to make sure you're receiving encouragement and receiving support to help sustain you. But we found it was just as important to give it. That there was this reciprocal nature that we as human beings feel that if I'm only giving support and not receiving any, then that feels out of balance for me, and that's straining. But also, if I'm only receiving support and I'm not giving it at some level, that doesn't feel right to us either. And what we found is they

thought of support in a multidimensional way. It wasn't just giving emotional support or emotional encouragement of Ken that was a great job or Ken I'm really behind you, that type of thing, that matters. But we found there were multiple dimensions of thinking about encouragement. They had people in their network that they turn to that were good listeners, and they would choose to also listen or people that they turn to for emotional support or even emotional challenge. Emotional challenge is a healthy form of support that I go to, Ken, because I just he challenges me to think about things in a perspective that I wouldn't go to on my own. Same thing with task, a task appreciation task challenge. I give Ken this paper because I know the way he looks at it. He can provide me ideas that I wouldn't normally get from my style of writing. But shared social reality, they go to people that kind of know their reality. So we found, for instance, student veterans may go to another student veteran because they know they only have to get halfway through a sentence

Ken White

Yeah.

Dr. Kelly Crace

and the other person knows exactly what their experience is. They get it. So what we found is that that they thought of encouragement in a multilayered way. And we also found that it wasn't necessarily like if you didn't have the support you need, they would actively seek to cultivate it.

Ken White

Mmm.

Dr. Kelly Crace

And what we found it was that process of cultivation that was that avoided burnout, not the actual attainment of it. It's wasn't that oh, I have to get my network in place. We found that if every day I am intending to, one, give encouragement to someone and seek encouragement from someone, just that process alone of cultivating your network helps avoid burnout.

Ken White

Step into something healthy every day.

Dr. Kelly Crace

And I love that metaphor stepping in because that is that kind of mindful notion of step into purpose every day, step into enjoyment every day, step into encouragement, and then step into something healthy. And the reason why that's so critically important is we

have to be intentional to step into healthy self-care because if we're not intentional, we tend to step into soothing. That's what we that's where we tend to go, especially in burnout conditions, because it's so hard, it's so stressful. We are wearing down. It's just a natural tendency for us to want to soothe. And there's nothing wrong with that per se. Nothing bad happens. The problem is the intentionality. And actually, the behavior can look the same. But when I intend to soothe, my intention is to feel better, and when my intention is to feel better, I'm trying to change brain chemistry as quickly as possible. I'm trying to change a mood from feeling bad to feeling good. And what I'll do is there's only five ways you can change brain chemistry really quick, and that's really quickly, and that is food, drugs, sex, pain, and compelling entertainment. That's where we go. That's what changes brain chemistry the quickest. And there's nothing wrong with that. Even like the pain of exercise, there's nothing wrong with those five things. The problem is when we intend to soothe, we don't manage those things well. We don't moderate them well. In fact, we kind of check out to where I can the example I gave with the Flex MBAs is we kind of we check out to the point where, you know, these two sugar cookies were absolutely delicious. I ended up eating twelve, and I don't even remember the last ten that I ate. It's just a dissociation where we're trying to check out and soothe. Instead, we found that people that flourish, they're mindful about stepping into something healthy.

Ken White

Umm-mmm.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Let me do something today that's healthy for me. Now, sometimes some of the healthy things also make us feel better, too. That's just a bonus. And so the consequence or the outcome of going out for a run and it also helping and also I do feel better. That's just a bonus that is great to celebrate and enjoy, but it can't be the reason you do it. The reason has to be healthy self-care. Let me step into something healthy today.

Ken White

And then, the fifth step, you mention how to process outcomes.

Dr. Kelly Crace

Yes. Yeah. Part of that healthy thing. And this is actually kind of the second part of the fourth step. The second part of the fourth step is what we found to really be healthy is also how you're thinking about your experiences in the day. And we found that most people that flourish are very verb focused, whereas, in burnout conditions, we tend to be noun focused, we tend to focus on the outcomes of the day. Are we getting things done? What did I experience? How did it go? Did it go well? Did it go bad, and we'll define our day by the outcomes? It was a good day. I had good outcomes. It was a bad day. I had bad outcomes. People that flourish do something very differently, they become very verb

focused. They focus on behaviors and processes. We've all in the athletics world we've all heard that analogy of process over outcome and that type of thing. And we've heard a lot that a lot about that. But it's actually purposeful process that matters. And so it's about stepping into purpose, but it's engaging and defining your success by the engagement in those verbs. So when I'm engaging in something that matters, the success of it is my actual engagement in it. Now, based on the outcome that just impacts our mood of the day. So if I define my success by stepping into a verb such as learning or expressing what I've learned or relating or healthy self-care, that's my success. If it goes well and the world cooperates that that's just a bonus. That's a great day. And if the world beats us up for that, well, we're going to feel that we can say at the end of the day, well, I'm disappointed because I worked hard for something and didn't get it. That's okay. The people that flourish only see that as a mood. They define their worth by the engagement in those verbs.

Ken White

And you said that the processing of outcomes. Is that step four A, or is that step five?

Dr. Kelly Crace

That's step four B. Four A is healthy self-care, and four B is one of the ways to be most healthy is the perspective of how you're entering the day. And that's be more verb focused, process-oriented

Ken White

Got it.

Dr. Kelly Crace

instead of noun focus, which is outcome-oriented. And then the last one is really it's really the most critical one because it's the most neglected and the most neglected one is people that flourish will take a minute at the end of every day. And value and appreciate where they stepped into those other four things, they don't do it. I mean, they don't go into a lotus position and reflect for 30 minutes of self-love. Again, it can be a brushing the teeth moment. At the end of the day.

Ken White

Wow.

Dr. Kelly Crace

They'll take the time and really value. Where did I step into purpose? Where did I step into encouragement, to enjoyment, into healthy self-care? And they take a moment to appreciate that. The reason for that is that's the transformational process that transforms

purpose into meaning. Purpose is more motivational, meaning is more reflective. And so if we'll take the time to reflect on where we engaged in things that mattered to us, that actually transforms purpose into meaning. And what we found is the secret is when people believe that they are living meaningful lives, they don't burn out. They are able to kind of sustain the stress and the challenges of the day because they still feel like they are owning the day, or they are mostly in control. I can't control what the world has handed me, but I can control the fact that I'm living a meaningful life, and that is enough to prevent burnout.

Ken White

All five steps. Do we need to embrace every day? Can we do one or two or three?

Dr. Kelly Crace

Sure. I mean, we're human beings. And so it's simple. We found that as a package, they work synergistically. So so as a package, it's best to be able to be mindful of all of those because they are interdependent. I can't. I can't really reflect on meaning at the end of the day if I haven't started with purpose.

Ken White

Right.

Dr. Kelly Crace

And so you want to try as best you can. But again, this is hard. It's so simple. There's nothing about flourishing that's complex. It's just really hard to do in the relentlessness of our world. And so what I don't want people to do is, you know, I failed today because I only did three of the five steps. Now it's about admiring your courage and embracing the courage that if I'm stepping into something that's right and hard, that actually is what is courageous. And whenever I step into hard, that's growth-producing. So if every day I'm trying to step into these things and I'm trying to do this in a growth perspective, you'll move forward. It'll be forward moving. It just works optimally when you can try to package all five together. And the nice thing about it is all five of those intentions. They just take a couple of minutes. Remember, we're talking about mindful intentions. So it's directing your energies. It's consecrating your energy. It's kind of dedicating my energies toward this. That doesn't take very long in and of itself. It's just hard to carry it out.

Ken White

Well, that's our conversation with Dr. Kelly Crace, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. There is no better time than the present to pursue an MBA. If you're thinking about it, pursue one that delivers a transformational experience. The William & Mary MBA four format's the Full-Time, the Flex or Evening Program, the Online, and the Executive

MBA. 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 Kelly Crace, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week.