



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 3: KELLY CRACE – HOW TO HANDLE STRESS

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from all across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Stress. Regardless of who you are and what you do, you experience stress every day. Experts tell us there are two types of stress the kind that can be helpful and motivating and the kind that can be harmful to your life, your mood, and your relationships. Dr. Kelly Crace is a psychologist and Associate Vice President for Health and Wellness at the College of William & Mary. For over 25 years, Crace has worked with individuals, athletes and teams, companies, and organizations to understand stress and how to deal with it. He shares his expertise with us on today's podcast. Here's our conversation about stress with psychologist Dr. Kelly Crace.

Ken White

Kelly, thank you. Thank you greatly for sharing your time and your expertise. I've heard great things about you. I'm really interested to talk about the topic of stress. It seems to be something that so many people in all walks of life talk about. How do you professionally what is your role in terms of stress and stress management?

Kelly Crace

Our role in the university campus and in working with organizations is really trying to help people have a deeper understanding of stress. There's a lot of connotations around this concept of stress. Most of it is a negative connotation that stress is bad and that we need to do what we can to reduce stress which research tends to show that's actually not the case. In fact, the most negative health aspect of stress is the belief that stress is bad. And so it's about being able to understand stress at a more complex level. And we do find that there are some aspects of stress that are bad. One of the main considerations is the stress I am experiencing, purposeful stress or more fear-based stress. And they actually go hand in hand. And so it's something that one has to manage, and we find that people that one part if you could think of stress of having two components. One is the stress that's

associated with caring. It's physiologically impossible to feel stress over something unimportant to you.

Ken White

Oh, sure.

Kelly Crace

Whenever we feel stress, we know that that's something that's important to you, and that's a good thing. So it's really about kind of looking at the neuroscience of caring what happens in your brain when you decide to care about something, and that brings up the other aspect of stress, which is uncertainty because everything we care about has some level of uncertainty. There's always an unpredictability to either something or someone we care about. So once I decide I care about Ken, one of the things that will then immediately come up to me is the what-if question. What if something happens to this person that I care about?

Ken White

Sure.

Kelly Crace

And so that's the uncertainty component which then brings fear into place. And so what we've learned is stress is this kind of very dynamic dance between what we care about and what we fear and how do people hold that well. When we look at the area of flourishing, we find that people that flourish are not less afraid. They just hold fear really well.

Ken White

Well, what is the difference, right? You're talking about some things that are pretty near and dear to our hearts. This is important stuff. And so some people do seem to get, I guess, for lack of a better term, worked up, then others do what makes the successful person in terms of this successful what tools they employ.

Kelly Crace

Right. When we look at how we kind of fell into this is our work that first started with the work of values. Is what do people do when they clarify that this is important to me, and you can recognize that, especially in the age population that I work mostly within the university setting. These are young adults that have been raised with certain values, and now they're coming into an environment and starting to clarify for the first time which of these will I own as mine and which of these do I disagree with in developing my own value system. When you look at that kind of values constellation, that value system that is now personally yours or personally mine, what that starts to help us understand is values is your

they are your purest form of motivation, and they're your number one source of fulfillment, but they're also your number one source of stress.

Ken White

Right.

Kelly Crace

So there's that two-edged sword, that double-edged sword between once we decide to care, we experience the benefit of motivation. We experience the challenge of stress, and what we essentially find is people that struggle with managing stress well. And by that, I mean struggle with resilience when they struggle with being able to manage the hardness of life, the unfairness of life, the challenges of juggling so many things that we care about. People that struggle with doing that drift into this place of defining themselves more by the outcomes of what they do than the expression of their values. So why are we vulnerable to do that? That's just a human thing that's not a if you dare to care then you dare then you are absolutely bringing in the portal of fear. So what we find is the reason why we're overstressed we're unhealthfully stressed is human beings are not really taught how to in a sophisticated way manage fear.

Ken White

Yeah.

Kelly Crace

And so if we're not taught how to manage fear, you'll go the natural way. The neurologically natural way of coping with fear is basically two pathways. One is either through overcontrol and mastery, and the other is through avoidance and escape. So if I can do this perfectly, then I don't have to worry about failing. I don't have to worry about the fear of the what if. Or if I can just step away from this uncomfortable fear until it has to be done. Well, when it has to be done, then it doesn't matter if you're afraid. So if you look at that kind of overcontrol, which we define as perfectionism, or if you look at that avoidance and escapist kind of approach, which we define as procrastination.

Ken White

Right.

Kelly Crace

Perfectionism and procrastination are the neurologically natural ways we cope with values-based fear, the values-based uncertainty that's what we know. That's what we're. That's what we've learned. And so that's what we do because we're not taught a different way. So we become aware of that as early as middle school, eighth or ninth-grade young

adolescents and emerging adults become aware of these things are starting to matter to me. And then they start to become aware of all the things that can get in the way of that. So then they develop that short path, that short path of how do I get there. And that's usually based on outcomes if I can get these grades and get these opportunities to get into this school, to build this portfolio, to get into this graduate program, and get these relationships. The short path becomes their way of managing that fear through control. And fortunately too well, fortunately, or unfortunately, however, we want to determine they can escape instantly today. They can immediately distract themselves and escape away from when they're too stressed. The problem with that the vulnerability of that is we start to define that short path by outcomes so that any detour from those outcomes or unexpected outcomes or disappointment becomes something that is threatening to us, something overwhelming to us. So it's no longer just a disappointment. It's a failure. It's a it's actually an obstacle that might threaten my ability to get where I want to get.

Ken White

So how do you teach people to manage fear?

Kelly Crace

So we work on actually moving them toward a place of holding fear better, and what that actually looks like is that values are in the foreground, and fear is right in the background. It's not about eclipsing fear or getting rid of fear. It's recognizing they go hand in hand. It's how do you lead with values instead of leading with fear. So if I, if I followed you around in this very annoying manner all day and asked you over two minutes, why did you do that? Why did you do that? There would be, honestly, times during the day where you and me, if we were asked that question we, would say because I'm afraid that if I don't, this will happen.

Ken White

Right.

Kelly Crace

There'll be other times in the day when I ask you why did you do that. You'll say because it's right for me to do it. It's right because this is something that matters to me. It comes down to this kind of simple equation. We find that during a day, if you will lead more of the why you're doing something, if you lead more with your values than with fear, we tend to flourish, and if in a day's time, by the end of the day, you lead more with fear than with your values. Then you tend to kind of plateau and stay stuck at good. Not an awful thing. It's not a bad thing.

Ken White

Right.

Kelly Crace

It's just a more stressful thing. It's a less-than-healthy stressful thing. The hard part about all this, Ken, is our most natural way when we lead with fear when we say so. How do you know that? What does that mean? The reason is when we lead with fear, that puts us in a need state instead of a values state. And when I'm in a need state, what I'm needing is reassurance that everything's gonna be okay. When I'm leading with fear, I need to know that everything's going to be okay. The only way I have to be able to determine that everything's going to be okay is through outcomes. So I'll start really investing a lot of my worth and identity on what's happening to me. The experiences that I'm having and what that then leads to is this chronic level of evaluation. This chronic scorekeeping. How am I doing now? How about now? How about now?

Ken White

Right.

Kelly Crace

In fact, chronic the chronically evaluative mindset is the number one cause of insomnia today. When I'm quieting my body and activating my mind, am I keeping score on the day of what I'm doing? Well, we shift into work is moving from this very outcome-oriented or experiential mindset of I'm defining myself by what I experienced today to more of an expressive mindset, and by expressive, we're talking about the expression of your values. That if I start to define myself by the expression of what I believe is right for me and focus on the actions of that we tend to find ourselves very resilient because we're more process-oriented we're able to go into a deeper level of critical thinking a deeper level of creativity, and we're less judgmental. So if you look at the heart of what trumps fear, essentially, what trumps fear is trust, and so when we are in a state of trust, we put fear in its right perspective. Well, the question then is, what do you trust? The one thing that we can always trust is our personal truth, and our personal truth are our values.

Ken White

Interesting.

Kelly Crace

So if I define the day, if I start to define the day by what I express, the expression of my values, and hang my hat on that and let the outcomes just be the mood of the day, I'm not saying outcomes aren't important they're critically important that it's with those outcomes.

If they're more the mood of the day than the worth of the day, that determines whether you flourish or whether you just kind of stay stuck at good.

Ken White

You mentioned insomnia which made me think of maybe meditation. People thinking the mind just going and checking off the list. This was good. This was not so good. Meditation seems to be so discussed so often in the business world. Many people, CEOs included, are experimenting with it. What actually is meditation? What's it do for an individual?

Kelly Crace

Meditation is that it's kind of a catch and recover kind of process. When we are in the state of stress, when we lead with fear, when we're vulnerable to this kind of doubt and uncertainty, our mind either goes very forward or very backward. We were either thinking forward as to the what if we were reflecting back and judging ourselves.

Ken White

Yup.

Kelly Crace

And so we just naturally, if you allow your mind to drift, you're either going to go forward or backwards. It's unnatural to stay in the present.

Ken White

Right.

Kelly Crace

Yet we find to the degree we can be very mindful and accepting what is happening around us and focus on what is right for me to do right now. What's the right devotion of my time and energy right now? That's when we find that not only are you working at your best, but that's when you're also the most curative. That's when you're kind of in a healing state. Because when I'm able to be absorbed in the moment and be expressive in the moment, that's when we're the most productive, the most fulfilled, and the most present. It's actually we you've heard of the zone flow experience.

Ken White

Sure.

Kelly Crace

Everything just clicks.

Ken White

Right.

Kelly Crace

That is something that we used to think we can't control that we just hope for. At the right moment of our training, when it's time to perform, we hope for that zone. We actually can train that more successfully because when you're in the zone, you're actually in a fully expressive mindset.

Ken White

And the fear is just put away.

Kelly Crace

It's there. It's just managed well.

Ken White

Right.

Kelly Crace

So if you, when you're in the zone, what is actually happening is you're in a completely expressive mindset, and it looks like this. In this moment, I am completely accepting that this is the most right thing for me to do right now that I am fully enough to do it. That I'm going to trust my training and talent to date, you don't have to be perfectly there yet, but I trust that my training and talent today is enough. And then this is the last one, which is the kicker, and I fully accept whatever happens. When you're at that place of acceptance and expression, that's when you're in the zone, and that's what we train people to do. To focus on defining themselves more by what's the most right devotion of my time and energy today. Be fully engaged in it with full acceptance of whatever happens, and that moves us to a deeper form of excellence.

Ken White

You've been at this for a while. You were talking earlier, you know, a couple of decades now. How have you seen the work world change in regards to what you do and what you study? Is it are we more or are we tighter than we used to be, or are we more tense? How have you seen the changes?

Kelly Crace

For very real reasons, for very understandable reasons, at a systemic level, we have become more fear-based. We have we lead with fear more at institutional levels. Are we more reactive to what is going on, or the decisions we're making more reactive based on

the fear of the what-if? We're much busier out of fear when we when you look at one of the number one causes of unhealthy stress. When you ask people in the workforce what's the biggest source of stress to you right now. Most of them will say email management, and part of the reason for that is the fear of not being responsive, the fear of being judged negatively if I don't immediately respond to this person when they're asking for that response, and they stay it's ongoing. So being able to kind of help them understand that because of things that are going on around them that are very real and very pressuring, like in the university environment, we are demanded since, you know, the college life changed a few years ago with Virginia Tech.

Ken White

Oh, sure.

Kelly Crace

It changed forever. And with that, there became this pressure of us being perfectly predictive and perfectly protective and which is something we will perfectly fail at. But from that, with that fear-based need for us to pay attention to that, are the decisions we're making more protective and more trying to reduce fear, or can they come back to what is right for us to do, what is really right for us to expect of ourselves to provide as healthy an environment as we possibly can and to train young adults to be very active consumers active and mature consumers of health. Part of that is about helping them redefine what wellness really is, instead of this kind of dichotomous level of sick or well, to help them understand the multiple dimensionality of wellness. That helps us made a stress better.

Ken White

If someone struggling in this arena, and many people I talked to are. There's so much going on in technology. Of course, email and I agree when we teach corporate groups at our Center for Corporate Education. Email management comes up every single time. So many people, I think, have probably a higher level of fear or stress than they'd like. What's step one for them to just sort of feel a little bit better? What is one of the first things they ought to do?

Kelly Crace

The courage to set boundaries and that is so hard because what we find when we look at people that are overstressed, and we do some assessment in terms of what is their knowledge level what is their content knowledge of stress management. We find especially in the workforce and at the college level. Individuals know what to do to take care of themselves. They don't need certain techniques and strategies. They know how to manage time. They know the techniques of stress management. They know what they're supposed to do in terms of eating. They know what rest is about. It's not that we need to

teach them necessarily the content. It's when you ask them what keeps you from doing what you know is healthy. The phrase usually always starts out with I am afraid that.

Ken White

Wow.

Kelly Crace

And so they don't set boundaries for themselves out of the fear of whatever the fear of failure, the fear of disappointing others, whatever it is, they keep saying yes, and they don't say no. So the courage to boundary, the courage to boundary your email responsiveness, the courage to boundary your commitment to activities. What we try to help them see that is as a fight. There is no just to that you don't just set boundaries. You don't just do these things. You recognize that it takes courage to do it and that you fight to do it for the rightness of it for the health of it, which is just really important to be able to do. So one of the things that we always tell the individuals that are coming to college campuses is that, and we have found it especially relevant working with organizations. My background is working with multigenerational family organizations. And so that's particularly relevant during transition. But one of the things, if you do nothing else, commit to this one strategy, and that is give yourself a 24-hour pause before you say yes to anything, even if you know you're going to do it. Say sounds great. Let me get back to you tomorrow. It's the campaign of give it a day, then during that one 24 hours if you will go back and look at what you're doing and assume that you're 100 percent committed because you will be. If I'm going to take off on this thing. What value does it have to me, and at what cost to take it on? If they'll do that work, then they'll know that if I take this on, I've got to give something up.

Ken White

Right.

Kelly Crace

Where if I cannot give up anything. Then I have to do this awful thing which is say no but doing so in the faith that something else is going to come along. It is the hardest thing in the world to say no to something that has that's connected to our values and because it's just it feels wrong to say no to something that has meaning to us. And so one of the things that we find with people that flourish is they ask a very important question to themselves that's attached to their values. They not only ask what's right for me, but they also ask at what cost. And so that's one of the best ways to boundary our lives is to keep that question alive of at what cost to take on this thing.

Ken White

Kelly, thank you. This is fascinating. We could talk for hours but thank you so much for sharing your expertise. We really appreciate your time.

Kelly Crace

It's a real pleasure, Ken. It's nice spending time with you.

Ken White

That's our conversation with psychologist Dr. Kelly Crace, Associate Vice President for Health and Wellness at the College of William & Mary. If you'd like to learn more about understanding and dealing with stress, especially in terms of how it relates to your values. Dr. Crace shared a website with us that he helped develop. The address is lifevaluesinventory.org. That's lifevaluesinventory.org. It's a free site that focuses on values clarification and a personal development plan. Well, that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you and your organization by designing and delivering a customized leadership development program that specifically fits your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education, check out our website at wmleadership.com. That's wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest this week, Dr. Kelly Crace, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe and productive week.