



SpeakOnIt Podcast Season 2: Secrets of Well-being
Episode 6: Spiritual Well-being

Dannie 0:00

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Kaelyn 0:12

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Jay 0:24

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Jay 0:47

Hi everyone, welcome back to SpeakOnIt Season 2: Secrets of Well-being. In this episode we will be discussing spiritual well-being, affirmations, and words of power. Joining us today are Dr. Chevaughn Wellington and Jada Thompson. Chevaughn Wellington is a former YAB member and recently graduated medical student planning to pursue a career in psychiatry. She is currently doing her residency, and her enthusiasm for mental health developed due to her clinical experiences in medical school, the effects of complex trauma on her community, and her personal experience with anxiety. Jada Thompson (she/her) is currently pursuing her Masters in Public Health and Health Promotion Health Education at UTHHealth School of Public Health in Houston, Texas. Her goal is to address and resolve the health disparities faced by BIPOC as well as sexual and gender minority youth living in rural communities. Thank you for being here, Chevaughn and Jada!

[Insert Rose-Bud-Thorn Song]

Jada 1:44

My rose would technically be today. My birthday is tomorrow and my family kind of took me out to eat. I would say a bud is a job opportunity that I hope I get, [but] I won't find out until next Friday. Honestly, my thorn this week is a lot of my assignments.

Jay 2:07

I think my thorn is similar to yours, definitely assignments. This semester a lot of my professors are using a program called VoiceThread, and getting adjusted to that system has been a very interesting learning opportunity. A rose for this week was that I got to spend some time with a friend at a coffee shop, and we got to hang out and talk and study together. That was nice. A bud is that the quarantine that I typically do for my plants, when I bring them back from the garden centers and whatnot, is starting to close. Now they can be introduced to the rest of the plants in my room and my little dream of having a little jungle inside my bedroom is coming to fruition. So that's really exciting!

Dannie 3:10

My thorn of the week would probably be not getting enough sleep last night. My rose was that I made some new friends and we played some music, which is awesome. My bud would be going into next week looking forward to going to more choir rehearsals and starting to get initiated into that whole thing.

Dr. Chevaughn 3:30

My rose for the week is an event I attended with my institution yesterday. It was an underrepresented in medicine event. We got to eat really good food and meet people from a variety of different residency programs. It was a really good time and it was nice to see and spend some time with people that look like me. My bud is getting the hang of residency, which is a process. My thorn is related and it's feeling like I'm not quite where I want to be yet at this point in my training.

Jay 4:20

Thank you for sharing your roses, buds, and thorns for this week. Let's go ahead and define spiritual well-being. As described by the National Wellness Institute, spiritual wellness, or as we're calling it well-being, encompasses how one recognizes the search for meaning, purpose, and human existence. This includes the development of a deep appreciation for the depth and expense of life and natural forces that exist in the universe. For me I think sometimes when I read definitions that talk about the universe, life, and stuff, there's some dissonance or something that happens where I'm like, "Oh, that sounds a little too out there."

Dr. Chevaughn 5:00

I would agree with you, Jay. The use of the term universe is challenging for me at times and I think that's because my spiritual well-being is very much focused on a specific faith background. Therefore sometimes I have a hard time when I hear the term "universe," but I also recognize that spiritual well-being looks different for different people. I recognize that it's because I'm coming from a very specific angle, that's why I would get more specific. My priority is with my relationship with God. Everything I do on a day to day basis keeps Him in mind, in terms of my behaviors, the way that I interact with other people, and the way that I think about myself.

Dannie 5:56

For me, spirituality is what your relationship looks like with the things that you can't control. That's kind of my short answer for it.

Jay 6:05

I want to thank all of y'all for your perspectives and interpretations for spiritual well-being. To circle back to our goal of connecting this to the Steve fund and connecting it to BIPOC experiences - and for our audience, BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous, People of Color - what are y'all's experiences, or experiences that you've heard or seen, as related to spiritual well-being for BIPOCs?

Dannie 6:35

Well, the whole dynamic surrounding spirituality and mental healthcare, and one negating the need for the other. I think that may be a recurring theme in communities of color around the world. I think it's important to realize that there's definitely room in someone's life for both. I think sometimes people might think that you're not doing your spiritual life right if you need help with your mental health, and I think that might be some sort of stigma or misconception that a lot of people have.

Dr. Chevaughn 7:16

I could not have said it better myself, Dannie. That is something that I have struggled with at times, given that I have anxiety. I get in my head sometimes and think, "Well maybe I'm not praying enough, or maybe I'm not doing certain things and that's why I'm struggling with this." I have to recognize that it's not about that, it's more. I'm dealing with this thing called "anxiety" and I have multiple outlets and resources that I can use to address my anxiety, whether that be praying, whether that be reading the Bible, whether that be going to a therapist, and in some cases for some people using medications. All of that is more than okay, and it doesn't have to be mutually exclusive.

Jay 8:06

I definitely agree. For the longest time I was also in the same boat. I would rely primarily on my spirituality to help with my mental health. I grew up in a Christian Presbyterian background. My mother was the primary churchgoer in my more immediate family. In my extended family we have Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, Tallis, [we are] all over the place in terms of that. For my mom, as someone who came to the States as an immigrant that didn't speak English very well, going to the Korean church really helped build that community. It helped with her social well-being, mental well-being, and spiritual well-being to be able to connect with others and be affirmed in terms of our background. "God is watching you. God is here for you. This church, this community, is here for you as well." I think in that sense, it has been really helpful for some minority populations.

Now for me, as someone who grew up in that background, as someone who identifies as a gay man, that didn't necessarily resonate with me - especially with some of the teachings from the churches that I particularly went to. I'm not saying this is applicable to all churches, because I know there are very affirming churches out there. For me, it kind of turned me away from more religious or organized backgrounds, and I turned to individual solitary spiritual practices. I think that's how I've been able to connect with my spiritual well-being and connect to my purpose. I

think it's also really affirming to be able to be like, "Hey, you don't necessarily need a crowd or religious group to back you up in terms of helping you with your spiritual way of life," but that's okay as well.

Dannie 10:26

I'm curious - If you don't mind sharing, Jay, what are some of your individual spiritual practices that you've engaged in that you found really helpful?

Jay 10:35

I think for me, it's just being able to pray by myself and being able to connect more abstract ways of thinking and put that into my practices. With votive candles - for those that are not sure what votive candles are, they're just dedication candles that you put for people. For me, that's been really helpful because that isn't how we prayed growing up. I like to kind of mishmash things to help with my prayers and stuff like that.

Jada 11:13

That's cool! I come from a Baptist background, and my grandmother is the main churchgoer and she's a deaconess, as well as all of her siblings, and all of my family. Interacting in church, one of the things that I do is sing in the choir. I come from a very religious background. I kind of started shying away from religion and going into spirituality probably around high school, because, as you were saying, Jay, some of the teachings I didn't really agree with. This is at the churches that I've been to. I was like, "Huh, I don't know about this". I wanted to branch off and kind of do my own thing. [For example,] I kind of felt weird praying in front of other people I don't know. I never really felt comfortable. If we were all praying together, I would keep to myself. One of the things I do is I write my prayers down in a book or a journal. At the end of the week, I can look back and see, "...this was addressed," or, "this is something that I hope can be addressed in the future." I totally agree with you on that. Doing things by myself is a lot better for me than doing them in a group setting.

Dr. Chevaughn 12:51

I use a Bible app, and my friends and I sometimes make plans together. It's a mutual exchange in terms of spiritual growth. I also like to do stuff on my own, especially prayer as well. I'm more of a shy person, so sometimes when I'm at church and we're praying together - kind of like what you were talking about, Jada - it's a little overwhelming for me. I also have a little box. I haven't used it in a bit of time, but I have a little box that I sometimes put prayers into and I'll decide one night that I'm gonna pray about these specific things, and I have them in a box. Many of the prayers that I have in that box have come to fruition, and that's been such a blessing to see that manifestation as well.

Dannie 13:47

I also grew up going to church every single Sunday. I probably would have been more shy than I was, but I remember that anytime the people in the church started singing a song, my dad would say, "Sing out! Don't be afraid to sing out." That was a really big thing. That's one way to show your love for God and to praise God - just use the voice that He gave you. I guess that

was the idea. I remember doing that a lot and I continued to do that through high school. I went to a Catholic High School and I think that masses were often recharging for me. I remember walking out of many of them and feeling a lot more at peace. It was definitely cool to have that community. One argument I've heard for sticking with a church or similar format is maybe you don't agree with everything, but is it worth sacrificing the community? I guess that's something to take into consideration. If you can't find a better one at the moment, that may be something to think about. There are other types of groups that aren't necessarily labeled as spiritual groups, like my cross country team or things like that. I remember running in nature being a really grounding experience for me. I've actually been into yoga for a really long time, but I was recently certified as a yoga instructor this summer. That's something I've found to be very centering for me, and I'll do that every morning. I feel like it almost always makes my day go better.

Jay 15:14

To kind of follow up with that, how do y'all identify or how does your identity come into play when you discuss your spirituality, religious practices, and overall well-being?

Dr. Chevaughn 15:30

For me, my identity as a Christian comes first before anything else. That is challenging at times because I'm in the field of medicine which can be demanding. It can often feel like that's the identity that I'm supposed to carry first, and that has been a barrier at times. For example, if I've had to work when I would normally attend church, certain holidays, or other things not being viewed the same way as other holidays. There are times when I have to find my ways to keep centered with my identity as a Christian, before anything else. My identity as a Black woman is probably the second most important identity for me, and I would actually put that one before being a physician as well. When things are happening in the community that are directly affecting people that look like me, it affects me differently from some of my peers at times.

I think the two that can sometimes have conflict is my identity as Christian and my identity as a physician. I think my identity as a Black woman and my identity as a Christian marry very well for me, but my identity of being a physician and a Christian can sometimes have conflict. Some of the people in this field have different beliefs, and unfortunately sometimes physicians say things to people of my faith background that are kind of demeaning or kind of puts them down, like, "Oh, you're believing this instead of trusting..." It can definitely be complicated or complex at times. Some people will really emphasize the importance of prayer and believe that in having faith they can be healed. In the Bible there are a lot of scriptures about healing, and some people will pray and hope for their loved one to be healed. In some cases, some people might have apprehensions about choosing medical care. Some people will try the medical care and the prayer, it depends on the person. Sometimes physicians look at it as though they're kind of delusional, unfortunately, and don't have respect for the fact that someone may have different beliefs from them. It's not just focused on science.

Dannie 18:20

I think there's this very big disregard for what you cannot see in science, and a lot of religion and spirituality has to do with individual experience and things that you can't really explain in scientific terms. I could definitely see that as being a source of conflict.

Jay 18:33

I think for me, one of the dissonances that I've seen in the scientific community and with religion is the concept of faith, hope, and miracles. Like you were mentioning Dannie, those are typically immeasurable. For me, spiritual well-being is being able to connect the things that can't be explained by science, for whatever reason. It's a way for me to be able to connect and be like, "Okay, there's something greater that's happening here in the moment," right? Sometimes it can be explained by science and other times it's to be determined. I think that was a really great point that you brought up Chevaughn, thank you for that.

I think it's really important to also be sensitive with the way that you communicate with certain groups. I'm primarily talking about queer groups and maybe atheists or agnostic people. For example, the phrase, "I'll pray for you or I'll keep you in my prayers, etc." Those could potentially be triggers for those individuals. I want to flip and reverse this as well. When religious individuals mention that, it comes from a very kind place. It's a place of like, "I'm keeping you in my thoughts. I'm asking for help. I'm asking for whatever it is that you're asking for or praying for." I think that's amazing, but I think also on the flip side it can also be very triggering for individuals that have had negative interactions through those backgrounds. I'm not saying it's like a black and white thing, I'm just saying it's like a back and forth type of thing. I'd be curious to see y'all's perspectives on that. Any ideas on how to maybe communicate from both sides?

Dannie 20:51

I think this is a really good question. After the yoga retreat, we were all in this group chat and whenever somebody shared something with the group, or they asked for prayers, there didn't seem to be any sort of discrimination against any type of support that people would send. They could be like, "I'm keeping you in my heart," or "I'm sending you light in love," which is a common phrase in yoga or, "sending prayers" or "thinking of you during this difficult time." It didn't seem like any particular one was valued over the others. I know in other spaces it might be like, "Why would you say sending prayers? Or why wouldn't you say 'sending prayers?'" I don't know, I guess it's up to the person. It depends on what they would appreciate the most. Normally, I guess people try to phrase it however the person who's receiving it would like or maybe it's just based on their own spiritual practice. I think nowadays it's maybe more widely accepted to just say, "I'm thinking of you," or something. I feel like maybe several years ago you had to say sending prayers or it wouldn't be legitimate enough. I don't know. I feel like nowadays, people are leaning towards spirituality more than ever, but maybe that's just what I've seen.

Jay 22:01

I think the way you phrased that was really interesting, Dannie. I guess focus on what the recipient would be open to, as opposed to how you would be open to it. This makes me think of the way we say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" to be inclusive of individuals.

Yeah, that was a really interesting point. Thank you for sharing that, Dannie. Jada? Chevaughn? Your thoughts?

Jada 22:36

Going along with Dannie, just ask people what they're comfortable with - it wouldn't hurt. You don't want to offend somebody, and you might not mean to at all. More than likely you don't mean to, but you might offend someone. I think asking people what they are comfortable with when it comes to spirituality and religion is helpful. Making sure that they're fine with what's being said, or the language that's being used. You don't want to offend anybody and keep them away, and you don't want to exclude anyone. Make sure that there is comfort there - from the beginning of something. That can be a way to resolve or address that area.

Dannie 23:50

I think this one was kind of hard for me to answer because this is one of those situations where I don't know what to say sometimes. I'm like, "Am I gonna say praying? Or am I gonna say something else?" I don't know what sounds right, or I guess what's true for me. I feel like I probably don't pray enough. I do try to meditate sometimes. I do believe that prayer is powerful, and I think we should do it more, but I also question how many people actually do it. When they're praying for you I'm like, "Are they actually doing it? Are they just doing it now, but they have not prayed for months before this? And now it's a really important time?" I know these are random thoughts, but what do people's prayer lives even look like anymore? I went to church a lot growing up, and I know about kneeling at the pew and just closing your eyes as people are receiving the Eucharist. I did nightly prayers and I think they did morning prayers here and there, but it just felt like saying words and then other times it felt a little bit more powerful. Maybe when I was meditating or when I was praying with a group of people, that just felt more profound to me for some reason. I guess it just differs from person to person and I sometimes wonder what prayer looks like for different people.

Dr. Chevaughn 25:05

I've been intimidated by praying at times. When you're at church, oftentimes you've got the people who really know how to say the right words, and they put it together so nicely. I'm like, "Okay, that's not me. I don't know how to say it so polished." Over the years, I've learned that prayer is a conversation. I usually try to pray in the morning, and I try to pray before I travel. More often than not [I pray] before I eat, sometimes I forget. Sometimes [I pray] at night, and then throughout the day - like if there's a difficult moment or I need help getting through a space. Sometimes it's as simple as saying, "Lord help me through this moment." At my church, they have prayer meetings, and they used to do them in person before COVID. One night a week they would have different people from the congregation come together and pray. As you were saying, Dannie, for some people praying in a group setting can be so powerful for them. That's the setting they might find to be more rejuvenating in terms of praying. For some people, praying by themselves is more comfy and more restorative. I think it is definitely different for different people.

Dannie 26:40

I just realized, I do do that. Sometimes I'll say a short prayer. I remember my cross country coach from high school taught us this prayer, "St. Teresa of little flower, in this hour, show thy power." We would say that before a race, and now sometimes I literally just say it for anything - even something that's just stressing me out. I'll just say the prayer and hope it works or adds something to my experience. I think it's important to keep that conversation open, and it can give you strength. I know sometimes I've heard, "You can do all things through God who strengthens you." Realizing it's not you just you who's doing something, you're supported. You have God behind you and you have your family behind you. You can think of prayer like that sometimes, and it kind of makes it easier to do certain things that might be really difficult. Just realizing you're not in it by yourself, you're not alone. I think that's a big part of spirituality too, having that community - physical and spiritual - and feeling that sense of connection and not feeling like you're doing it by yourself.

Jay 27:39

Because I do a lot of solitary practice, I tend to miss the community feel every now and then. I miss being able to have the social connection to be able to discuss certain spiritual views and ideas and kind of have that back and forth. I think for me at least, the pros of having my space and not having the social anxiety that comes with saying the wrong thing or saying the wrong prayer [are important]. In that scenario -

Dannie 28:15

Do you feel like your fear of saying the wrong thing or saying the wrong prayer keeps you away from engaging in spiritual groups?

Jay 28:24

A lot of my prayers are very personal, and I like to keep a lot of my personal prayers to myself as opposed to sharing them with people. Because, again, the churches that I've been to tend to be quite gossipy. Some of the things that I would share wouldn't necessarily stay within that circle, and everybody and anybody ends up finding out what you're praying about and what you're praying for. Sometimes if it's not as personal, maybe you're asking for healing and helping for a sick family member, etc - that's amazing. If it's sometimes a little more personal, like for career ambitions, relationships, etc., I personally don't like that information being spread all over the place.

Jada 29:21

I know exactly what you mean, Jay. I come from a very small, small church. Being super shy and not really talkative to people, and then also being one of the youngest members in the church, I kind of felt weird if I had to pray and say what I was praying about. As a kid, you're like, "Oh, I hope I get this toy." That's your prayer. I'd be embarrassed if I said, "Oh, God, please give me the Wii for my birthday," kind of thing or something. At least in my experience, similar to Jay, I didn't feel comfortable interacting a lot in church, because it was more of that community, group-type setting where it's kind of like a group share. I never really liked to do anything in that type of format for fear of being judged. I guess that's just something that eventually you grow out of, but it's still in the back of my mind now that I'm older. I try not to fret so much about being

judged, but it's still there. I kind of have that fear when it comes to religion and its focus on group and community. I have no problem with that - that's amazing - but I still want to be to myself, be very introverted, and keep things just between me and God. A direct streamline and not many streamlines just to get there. I totally understand exactly what you mean, Jay.

Dr. Chevaughn 31:22

I think what's been helpful for me, because I'm also a shy person, is finding a few people that I know that I can really trust and feel really comfortable sharing my spiritual struggles with. I am on a platform with people who are practicing abstinence. In the society we're in right now, abstinence is not necessarily popular, and it's been really helpful to meet people with a similar mindset. There have been a few people on there that I've actually had communications with off of that site, and we text every now and again. We talk to each other about the different struggles that we're having. As someone who's also introverted and shy, having more of that one on one type of conversation - even friends that I made outside of that app, that I might have met in person or wherever it may be that I met them - having those individuals that I know I can say, "Listen, today was a rough day, let me tell you what happened," and knowing that whatever I'm telling them is safe with them is important. They're gonna pray for me and on my behalf, and I can have that open dialogue with them and still feel safe.

Jay 32:43

Alright, so moving on, Chevaughn with all the topics that we've discussed, what are your initial thoughts on how one can balance their spiritual well-being with life's pressures?

Dr. Chevaughn 32:58

That's a great question. I'm still figuring that out. One thing I try to make sure I do every day is read at least a passage from the Bible. Some days I get through chapters or a chapter, and other days it tends to be smaller passages. Like I mentioned before, I use this Bible app, and it's helpful because they have different plans on different topics. Recently, I've been really trying to focus on choosing joy - especially when you have so many pressures going on in your life. Right now, it's my professional career that is very challenging for me. I'm in the trenches trying to learn how to actually be a doctor and I'm trying to really focus on choosing joy. So I recently did a Bible plan on that, and it was so helpful. Even if that was the only thing I read for the day, it was super helpful to just remind me of the different ways that I can focus on joy in the midst of everything going on in life.

Something else that I had been doing is [using] this app called My Affirmations. They have free pre-made ones in the app, and you can also add your own. I have some biblically based ones and I have some that focus on physical health, mental health, and things that focus on healing from different areas as well. Every day, I have a different affirmation come into my phone and throughout the day I can read that and kind of keep myself centered and focused in the midst of everything going on. Here's a positive comment for today that you can remind yourself of, so sometimes it's like, "I'm learning to love myself, every day." Sometimes it's as simple as that. Other times it'll be something based on specific scripture. Other times it's things like, "I forgive myself for my past mistakes," simple things that you sometimes forget in the midst of having to

work. Maybe you had a fight with your loved one and you had all this other stuff going on, it's helpful to have something to remind myself of something positive every day.

Jay 35:15

I love that! I especially love how you mentioned that you're trying to read a little bit of Scripture, no matter how long the Scripture is for. That's also something that I'm coming to realize. For my spiritual well-being and practices, it doesn't necessarily have to be the whole shebang. I don't necessarily need to dedicate myself to it consistently every day as long as I can make space for a little bit of time to be able to connect with my spirituality. I think that is a way that I can deal with life's pressures. I also have little words of power or like little mantras that I've made that kind of helped me both spiritually and also like mentally. If I'm in a state where I'm like, "I am about to go off on someone," I find a little space for myself, repeat my mantra, and do my breathing and grounding exercises. It really helps me reconnect and remember what I'm here for, what my purpose is, and move forward from whatever the irritant or thing that triggered me was.

Jada 36:28

I don't really find myself reading the Bible as much. One way that I have that instant connection and me time or reflection time is through music. I love music. I'm a music nerd. I think one specific genre that I know will get me through [stressful moments] is gospel music. Old school gospel music like Shirley Caesar is what gets me through some really rough patches. The messages, rhythms, harmonies and everything is just - just love it. I love everything about it. I kind of use that as my outlet in connection with my spirituality. It looks different for everyone. I wish I had the attention span or no-laziness to read the Bible, and find that spiritual connection through readings, but it's different for everyone. I found that through gospel music, I can get that connection.

Dr. Chevaughn 38:11

Attention span wise, something that helps me is that they have an audio version on the [Bible] app. As someone who loves music myself, I'm finding that it's becoming easier for me to read when I listen, especially if I'm reading a longer passage. Sometimes I'm looking at the words and I'm like, "Why isn't it sticking in my brain? What's going on?" I found that audio and listening to the Scriptures rather than me trying to read them helps sometimes. On car rides music keeps me sane. I feel like my car has become my own personal church, and oftentimes that's when I'm doing most of my praise and worship. That helps me get through the day as well.

Jay 39:13

Looks like it's about time for us to wrap up. Before we do, I wanted to see if we could go around and see what everyone would like for our audience to take away from today's conversation.

Dannie 39:25

I would like to take away from this conversation a lot of the really practical tips we shared today, and personal things. I'm glad we got to discuss how we see religion and spirituality in today's modern and rapidly changing worlds. I think it's cool to be able to give people ideas of things

they can do. Ways they can actually incorporate their spiritual practice in their day to day life. Whether it's listening to the audio Bible, or listening to gospel music in the car, or realizing that they don't have to go to church. They could also find a group of friends that have similar missions with wanting to get to know God better or wanting to become more spiritually in tune. I think I'm gonna actually use some of these tips, and I hope that our audience finds them helpful too.

Jay 40:10

My takeaway is the cultural sensitivity that is associated between religion and spirituality. Being aware of interactions with others, and being cognizant of how you may intentionally or unintentionally kind of push your values on another individual. So just being cognizant of that!

Jada 40:43

One good main takeaway is finding what works for you. When it comes to spirituality or religion, just find whatever works best for you. Don't focus on what the majority is doing or what they say, because yes, that works for them, but more than likely it doesn't work for everyone. Just find what helps boost your connection to God through your spirituality and religion. I would say definitely find what works for you and focus on and improve that. If you want to add some things, that's totally fine. Find something that doesn't stress you out and doesn't feel like a chore to do. Find something that is almost like a hobby, that makes you think, "I can't wait to do it." You should keep that type of positivity and optimism. When it comes to your spirituality and your religion, it shouldn't be a chore, it should be like a hobby - you want to do it.

Dr. Chevaughn 41:57

I guess for me, it would be to find your balance between your community and your solo activities. I think both serve their purposes and I think having both ultimately augments one another and help you to have an overall better experience. I'm still learning how to do this myself, but finding that balance.

Jay 42:24

Definitely! It looks like this is it for today's episode. I want to thank Chevaughn and Jada again for joining us today and for our audience. Please stay tuned as we dive into the other dimensions of well-being for the season.