

## What The Well?

Podcast Edition: Mental Health and Wellbeing

### Transcript

[music and singing] It's The Well. Yeah, it's The Well, you ain't heard of us? Hey Rams, Hey What? Come and herd with us. If you lookin' round for a word to trust, check the Stall Seat Journal, you can learn from us. Sex? Sleep? Drugs? What are we goin' to discuss? Whatever you need to be prosperous. Negativity is superfluous. All we really want is for you to just be true to you and be who you are. You are a star and you will go far. You can succeed at all of your dreams, you'll get your degree, and all of those things. But you must take care of your health; cherish yourself. Your body, your mental, your grades, and your wealth. You can have fun, and still be well. That's what we do here at The Well. It's The Well. [music fades out].

Trisha: What's up, VCU? Hello, Ramily. Welcome back to our new listeners and for those of you just tuning in to our What The Well weekly podcast, we are glad you are here. I'm Trisha Saunders, the Associate Director of The Wellness Resource Center, and I'm thrilled to be with you this week. I came to VCU and The Well a little over 3 years ago and I love it here. I get really excited when I have the chance to work with students, and our Rams are amazing. It's pretty much my mission in life to help people, especially young people, successfully navigate the challenges they face- creating positive relationships, staying safer while exploring their boundaries, discovering the meaning of life, and staying grounded through some really tough stuff! In my role at VCU, I am also lucky enough to manage the amazing creative team responsible for bringing you your favorite bathroom reading- the Stall Seat Journal.

In our first podcast for What the Well?, The Well's Director, Lisa Joyner, talked to you a little bit about what we do here at The Well and what you can expect from us this semester. She also mentioned that VCU is now a JED Campus and how many people from across VCU have been coming together to support the mental health and wellbeing of our students. I'm here today to talk to you about one part of that larger JED Campus initiative. I'll be interviewing some special guests today to help bring some different perspectives on student mental health and wellbeing. I will be talking to Dr. Christine Strasser, a Staff Psychologist from University Counseling Services at VCU, Dr. Amy Adkins, an Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Psychology and a researcher with the College Behavioral and Emotional Health Institute, also known as COBE, at VCU. I will also, of course, be chatting with some awesome students about how they approach caring for their mental health while dealing with the rigors of student life.

By now, I hope that everyone on our campus has had a chance to see some of the messages that we have been putting out as part of our Rams CARE campaign- through VCU Social Media in posts with the tagline Be Herd, some of the information that you have seen possibly in our March Stall Seat Journal series which was expertly designed by students in the Scientific Illustration course within the Communication Arts Department here at VCU. You've possibly

seen posters and banners we've had up in Cary St. Gym, and a lot of other different forms of communication that have come out all across both of our campuses at VCU! Since I'm a sucker for things like acronyms and cohesion, the 'care' in Rams CARE actually stands for Cope.Adapt.Reframe.Empathize. Through this campaign, we are working to teach students ways that they can learn to recognize and cope with stress, adapt to the changes that get thrown at us as a part of life- some expected and others that come out of left field, how to reframe setbacks or challenges as opportunities to learn and grow, and some ways that we can connect to others through building empathy and understanding.

Learning how to build all of these skills can help Rams thrive- at VCU, and then after. Honestly, these are things that most of us work to master on a daily basis. I know I'm still learning and practicing staying grounded through all of it- every day. It can be tough, and sometimes we aren't able to do it alone. That's ok! That's what JED at VCU is trying to do- help connect members of our VCU community who need some extra help to the resources and the places at VCU who are best able to help them. So, if you are curious to learn more about this initiative or about JED itself, you can check out our JED website at [jed.vcu.edu](http://jed.vcu.edu).

Trisha: So, Rams, we are lucky enough to have with us today, Dr. Christine Strasser from University Counseling Services here at VCU. Christine's here to talk to us a little bit more about ways that we can recognize and respond to students in need.

Dr. Strasser: Thanks, Trisha. I'm happy to be here today, and as you said, I am a Staff Psychologist at University Counseling Services, and also am the Outreach Coordinator there as well. So, I'm really happy to be here today and to provide some information to students about how to seek help.

Trisha: So, Christine, one of the things we are trying to do is help students recognize signs that they (or a friend they are supporting) might be in need of some extra help. Can you help us go through what some of these signs might be?

Dr. Strasser: Yeah, so some signs that we can look for that would show us that maybe a friend or even ourselves might be needing some extra help is that we can look at kind of the four realms of our experiences. So we can look at, are there some behavioral changes, so are there any changes in sleep, eating, social interactions, engagement with their academics. Are there some cognitive changes? So, are there more self-critical thoughts and self doubt, difficulty concentrating, focusing, or even maybe thoughts of death or suicide. There can changes to our physical health. So, maybe there is some lack of energy, increased headaches, muscle pain and tension, um, maybe some nausea in their stomach. Um, and also there might some emotional changes, so maybe some frequent bouts of crying, not really knowing what's going on, feeling anxious, some mood swings. And if you or someone you know needs help, we always want to reach out, right? So, if we're noticing that, in that in the various areas of our lives, we're just not feeling like ourselves or our friends are acting differently, um we want to be sure to encourage

them to reach out. And the more information on signs on when to reach out, please check out the Counseling Center website or information listed with this podcast.

Trisha: Thank you. So, if a student is experiencing these signs, what can they do to seek help?

Dr. Strasser: Um, so, what I always encourage is that we should find someone that you trust. And, ideally, a professional that you can trust. So, this could be a medical provider at Student Health, a therapist at Counseling Services, it could be a provider in the community, or even a religious leader. And it's just important to let people know that they are not alone in their distress and that help is available on-campus and in the Richmond community.

Trisha: Great. Some of the research from the Healthy Minds survey taken at VCU in spring 2018, says that most Rams think that their classmates would think less of them for getting treatment for mental health... But when they were asked that same question- how do you they feel- would they think less of someone, almost all Rams said that they wouldn't!! This perception can have a huge impact on whether or not someone reaches out when they actually need it! So, what would you say to Rams who were hesitating to seek help?

Dr. Strasser: So, I think there's kind of multiple layers to that question. And I think the first part is, I would want to know where that hesitancy comes from. Um, is it due to stigma? Or, is it connected to them not believing they need treatment? A lack of time? I hear that all the time from students. Or, preference for self-management of their concerns? Um, once we have kind of identified where the hesitancy is coming from, wanting to normalize that, and that you know, really just validating that it is really hard to seek help, and how they may believe that they can do it on their own or that their problem is not serious enough, but that they still can come in to University Counseling and talk with one of our providers and we can help them connect to what resources they may need. You know, not everyone needs therapy, but many people need help, and UCS can help direct students to where they can find that help that they need. So, again, looking at the various resources on campus and in the Richmond community. We are so fortunate of all the different resources in Richmond. That we can kind of walk them through their hesitancy, see what it is, and then kind of see, if it's not therapy, what other things can we help get you connected to.

Trisha: Yeah. Yeah, that's really helpful. So, the Healthy Minds survey also tells us that, often, when Rams decide to seek help, it's because a family member or friend encouraged them. So what would you suggest Rams do to be better friends?

Dr. Strasser: So, I think first and foremost, listen and be there. Like, basic foundation is just listen. Be there. Don't judge when someone shares their pain, just sit with them. Listen. Ask the person what do they need in that moment, maybe they will want advice, maybe they will want to just be heard, maybe they'll want a hug. Um, if as a friend, we can be concerned and you know, show our fellow Rams that we want them to speak up, we want them to come talk to us, um and we can just listen and be there. We do want to say though, like if someone is reporting to us that

they're suicidal or they are having thoughts of wanting to die, we never want to keep that a secret. We never want to promise that we can keep that a secret. And we want to make sure, as a community, we are helping keep each other safe, and to normalize so that we can speak up about mental health concerns to break down those barriers that may be existing to seek help.

Trisha: So you just shared some really important information and some great resources for our VCU community. I wanted to thank you for taking time out of your day to do that and for being part of our What The Well podcast today.

Dr. Strasser: Of course, thank you for having me.

Trisha: So, we're lucky enough to have in our studio today, two of our amazing students. I'm going to let them introduce themselves and tell you a little more about who they are and what they do here at VCU.

Malcolm: My name is Malcolm, I'm a senior graduating in May, (wow!). Ah, I study advertising, creative writing. I just like to work for The Well. I try to basically say that my job is make the Well look cool.

Emily M: Hi everyone! My name is Emily Mustian. I'm a fashion design junior and I'm pretty new to the Well still. I help with the graphic design aspects of the Stall Seat Journal.

Trisha: Awesome! So I'm here to ask a couple of questions to get more of the student perspective around some of the things that we've been talking about today. So, I think one of the most powerful things we can do as human beings is learn how to support others through tough times. Can you tell me how have you done this or in what ways have you received this support from other people?

Emily M: I guess for me, it's mainly just through sports teams. At VCU, I'm on the VCU Swim club team and it's been nice having, um like, a physical way of getting out stress and but then also having others, you know, help me through it like as a like as a friendship aspect.

Malcom: That's awesome wow. For me, I try to just be there and just like make it known in general for the friendship that my presence is here if you ever need me. So then having constant communication so that they're comfortable coming to about stuff. That included my role as RA and stuff like that. But for me when I need my own support, I found that it's pretty much the same thing. Having those venues to open up about stuff and that can include with your friends or with an advisor. Actually, Trisha, you have been a huge component in my mental health journey just like being there for me, listening to me, and giving me your advice and stuff like that, as well as Linda was as well. I hope that answers your question.

Trisha: Yeah, so in a situations when people come to you in seeking support during tough times, What do you say to other Rams who might be struggling?

Malcom: Well, I guess it would depend on the situation. But, my ultimate goal is just listen when someone comes to me. Because a lot of the times, there's not even anything that needs to be said but they just want to be heard. So that is my biggest goal. Um, and then after that, depending on what it is, and if I have any experience with it I'll try to (and I'm always cautious putting my own energy into someone else's life) but just like helping them understand that they are strong enough and that they matter and what they have to say matters. And, um, essentially empowering them to not feel so alone, so that they can feel comfortable moving forward and solving the problems that they have been confronted with- if that makes sense.

Emily M: Yeah, going off of that, I would say the same thing. Like being there to listen to the person who comes to you for advice. But also being like an active listener. But also, if the situation they are coming to me for, if i can't personally help, then maybe, you know, encouraging them to find professional help and seeking other resources outside of a friend.

Trisha: Yeah! It's funny, it actually reminds me of the video that we created about a year ago called "The Self Care Song." One of the biggest take home messages from that is you're not alone. And I think that really does sum up what we are trying to say, is that when it comes to seeking help here at VCU, there are so many different places that you can receive that help. But I'm wondering if we should just go ahead and play the lyrics of that song because it was, I think, such a profound message that everyone needs to hear.

Malcom: Okay yeah sure. Let's do it!

[Self-Care Song plays]

Hey, what's up it's The Well again.  
Hoping that you doing pretty well my friend.  
Here to educate about your health again,  
Elevate emotional intelligence.  
Heard you're having problems with yourself again.  
Maybe you are focused on the negatives;  
Maybe you prescribe yourself medicine;  
Maybe you are feeling inadequate.  
Well tha's fine bruh, just be mindful.  
You can learn from this if you try to.  
Self kindness, it reminds us that  
our perceptions do not define us.  
Imperfect but you're worth it,  
so take a seat and rehearse this.  
Now take a deep breath - perfect.  
When you're ready to go ya better work it.

You are not alone.  
Just know that you are not alone my friend.  
You are not alone.  
No no no no you are not.  
Why are we so hard on ourselves?

Everybody has em,  
those bad thoughts are just like a habit.  
So, after approach with compassion.  
Disaster can turn into laughing.  
Why be unkind to your own self?  
The Well promotes health of the whole self.  
Talk to an expert no pressure.  
You can bring your bestie if it's better.  
Criticize yourself so you will succeed.  
Well, you might mess up when you learn new things. Check a Stall Seat that's a guarantee.  
Self conflict's more common than you may think.  
If you're not down with getting some counseling, and your heart's pounding, maybe you're frowning, maybe look around at your surroundings,  
maybe the profoundness can be grounding.

[closed captions to that song are also available on our thewellvcu [YouTube channel](#)]

Trisha: That song will always stay stuck in my head. I love it.

Malcom: Thank you!

Trisha: So another question that I have is, we know that how we treat our bodies really does impact how our brains function. So, getting adequate sleep, nutrition, physical activity and relaxation helps support our mental health! So, as students, with all of the different things that you juggle, how do you maintain your wellbeing?

Emily M: I'll be honest there are points when it does get quite difficult to balance everything. Um, but in situations where I really do need to step back and self-assess what is going on in my life. Maybe even just taking a break from things that are more stressful and that may be not as necessary to see as a priority in that given moment. Again, it depends on the situation. But that's kind of how I go about my stress management.

Malcom: It's, it's a tough balance. Because as a student, especially since someone like me, I have so many things I have to juggle, I'm often thinking ahead, even months, weeks, at a time. So, it's tough to find the balance between managing my time and my stress by organizing myself as much as possible. But then i have to stay present in the moment and be mindful about how I'm actually feeling, what I'm actually thinking. So in order to answer your question "How

do I maintain my well being?" I try to just reflect a lot. I write a lot to myself and try to maintain my spiritual health as well because I found that all that stuff is connected. As well as watching what I eat, because I found that the worse I eat the worse I feel. Which is interesting because when I was younger, like all I wanted to eat was junk food. But now I realize that it doesn't make me feel good. So, just like trying to find time to do the things that are important.

Trisha: Yeah you mentioned that, it's the difference between feeling good in that moment and reaching for that thing that will give you, maybe, momentary comfort but won't necessarily sustain your overall health and well-being over time. I think that's a really key, ah, key point to mention. So, I personally believe that there is no such thing as failure- that when things happen, I try and learn as much as I can from that experience- so that I can do something different next time. And change can be really difficult, and so being kind to ourselves as we try new things is really important. I'm curious to know, what are the most important messages you have learned when it comes to caring for your own mental and emotional health?

Malcom: This is a tough question.

Emily M: Yeah. I guess for me, like going off what you said about failure is not something you believe in. For me, it's taking a moment where you are "less successful" than what you had expected, and then allowing that to evolve you. Um, especially when it comes to mental health, because there is definitely times when there's a lot of struggle personally when it comes to developing. But it's like a matter of what you do with it and where you go from that. And, allowing others to help you, as well, and knowing that it's not just a singular journey but something you can do as a community.

Malcom: Yes. Yes, I agree there's something to be learned from every experience. One thing I definitely struggle with is being gentle with myself, and just recognizing I'm going to make mistakes. I'm going to mess up. I'm not going to meet deadlines. I'm going to do things that I probably shouldn't. But something that someone said that always really stuck with me was "Why would you say something to yourself that you'd never say to someone else?" Like, you know, think about the way you treat your friends, you're super sweet to them, you're so supportive. You love them. But when you talk to yourself (well, at least for me, I can't speak for anyone else), but I often beat myself up and am not very nice to myself. That kind of stuff has an effect. It's like bullying yourself in a way. But there's not really anything healthy that can come from that. I guess there is a way to do it healthfully, but it's hard to do it healthfully because we're not trained on how to talk to ourselves in a healthy way. So, I guess, the message I'd take away from this is be good to yourself.

Trisha: It's important we learn how to catch ourselves when we are, sort of, playing those criticisms back in our minds, so that we can reframe and say "okay, if this were someone I loved coming to me with this problem or issue, what would I say to them? How would encourage them?" Chances are the things we'd say to them are not the same things we'd say to ourselves.

I love that motto “Don’t ever say something to yourself that you wouldn’t say to someone in need coming to you for help.”

Trisha: So, I’m a big fan of check ups. Right, It’s recommended that everyone go to the doctor each year for a physical check-up to make sure that our bodies are working in a way that’s normal for us. I think that our mental wellbeing and our mental health is no different, right! It’s important for us to check in with ourselves regularly to make sure that we are ok! So, what do you suggest as ways for students to regularly check-in on their mental health and their emotional health?

Emily M: Hmmmm...

[laughter]

Malcom: mindfulness. Mindfulness and Meditation, for me, are ways to check on my mental state and sort of look at what I’m thinking and observe it in an objective way (as objective you can be with yourself). So that would be one thing. Just like, taking time to just sit with yourself and think in your thoughts, and just like you know pray if you need to, and just look at yourself and see what’s there to see how that makes you feel. And then another thing that I think is really important, just like how you were talking about you should go see a doctor, there’s doctors for your mental health as well. So, maybe seeing like a professional and checking in and talking to them about how you’ve been feeling and things you’ve been thinking and seeing what kinds of things they have to say that would hopefully help you on your journey.

Emily M: Yeah. Earlier you were talking about, um, what was it again, oh, journaling. Malcolm had mentioned earlier about journaling. I feel like for me personally, it’s nice to have kind of like a little mini record of yourself to see where you are in terms of your mental health, where you stand with yourself, and then just, you know, comparing it to how you feel in that given moment. And then also, you know, along with getting a check up with a professional, also maybe even going to your friends because they are more of an immediate first hand kind of, I guess like opinion that is more readily available, if like professional help can’t be like, you know, in that specific moment. So. Yeah.

Trisha: Thank you both for taking the time to be here today and for answering these questions. Any last words of wisdom or life lessons that you wanna share?

Emily: Eat. Pray. Love.

Malcom: Sleep. Breathe. Be. You are not alone (singing).

Emily M. and Trisha: [laughing]



Trisha: So Rams, our next guest is Dr. Amy Adkins, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology and a researcher with COBE: the College Behavioral and Emotional Health Institute here at VCU. So, welcome Amy and thanks for being here.

Dr. Adkins: Hi. It's nice to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Trisha: So, I have a question for you. We spend a lot of time talking about what success looks like here at VCU, and we really want our students to be successful. For most of them, that means sticking with it til graduation. You've done some really innovative research identifying some of the factors associated with getting students to graduation or keeping them from graduating. Can you tell us more about your findings and how they relate back to student mental health and wellbeing?

Dr. Adkins: So, I work here at VCU with the Spit for Science research project out of Danielle Dick's laboratory in the Department of Psychology. And Spit for Science is this VCU-wide research project that is looking at both how your genes and your environment can influence both your emotional and behavioral health. So, that includes things like substance use and depression, but also things like well-being and flourishing. So, a couple of years ago, we got a Quest Innovation Award that let us work with the Department of Strategic Enrollment Management and the Division of Student Affairs here at VCU so we could merge our data about health outcomes with data about academic success and also data about engagement with the University. And we were really interested, like you said, in what factors are, what factors exist that relate to increased retention and then the negative aspects, you know, increased drop-out. So, one, on the negative side, so things that influenced the risk of drop-out, we found substance use, um, as you might expect influenced drop-out, particularly heavy substance use. Using multiple substances, it almost doubled the chances, or the risk of dropping out. We also found depression; so depressive symptoms, things like feeling blue, losing interest in things, that also significantly impacted drop-out rates. And the last big thing we found was stressful life events, or traumatic events, experiencing those before you got to college, um, was very impactful on retention and drop-out. Interestingly, traumatic events while at VCU was less impactful, and we think that is showing all of the great resources and wonderful people we have here at VCU are helping students. That was a positive finding. On the positive end of things, we found that engagement with the University, um, that is related to increased retention. So, being involved in a student organization, more than one, being, having a leadership role in a student organization, that is all significantly contributing to retention rates. And we also found that attending Rec Sports, going to Rec Sports, participating, and the more that you do that, is significantly correlated with staying around here at VCU.

Emily M: I actually have a question about, what time period, I guess, you were focusing on. Were you talking about students from like a freshman or like, just university students in general.

Dr. Adkins: That is a very good question. We are a cohort study, so we enrolled students as a freshman if they wanted to participate and then we followed them over time. And at the point

that we did these analyses, we said, at any point in the students career did they drop out. So, students that had been in the project longer were older, so we are measuring chances of dropping out, and students who hadn't been in the project as long, we're looking at like year two, so it ranged from year two to year four, kind of overall risk of drop-out. For these particular analyses, we were looking at freshman year or first year, um, things like involvement in organizations and depressive symptoms. We have done subsequent analyses where we look at, in your second year, in your third year, and the interesting thing is we find very similar patterns.

Trisha: So how does this most connect back to student life?

Amy: So, one of the things I think about is that there is a lot of great programs at VCU and we have a lot of knowledge about what we think helps and doesn't help students, and so I thought this was a nice way of putting data behind it and like, quantifying, that yes, the things that VCU offers, the services are really helping students. And yes, things that happen outside the classroom do have a large impact on students' academic success.

Trisha: I'm just so, I'm fascinated by it, because I think a lot of our emphasis in a University setting is put on the learning that the students gain inside the classroom, which is of course, valuable and so important, but I think what you're showing is that the life that they have outside of the classroom and the things that are going on for them outside of the classroom, all of those things that make them a whole person, are the things that are really going to have an impact on how successful they remain inside of the classroom.

Dr. Adkins: If you put everything together and you kind of look at all these variables together, we see a similar pattern. You will see some things become slightly more important than others, but it's still looking like everything that we've looked at is still relating to drop-out. It's not that variables tend to disappear when you put them in with other things. So, it's as you said, this whole picture that is contributing to student success.

Trisha: Thank you so much for taking the time to be here and also for taking the initiative to do such important work and important research about our VCU students.

Dr. Adkins: Thank you. It's a huge team that kind of comes together to do this kind of work. And VCU was wonderful and all the partners we worked with Student Affairs and in the Strategic Enrollment Management, and Dr. Dick and her team, having, ah, the ability and the analytical skill to do this kind of work, and the two people in particular who did a lot of the analyses: Nate Thomas, who is a graduate student in Developmental Psychology Program at VCU and Dr. Peter Barr, who is a post-doctoral fellow in Dr. Dick's laboratory, had a huge part to do with this.

Trisha: Awesome.

Emily M: So, I have a question about accessibility. Do students have a way of reading this research and maybe getting involved in this research if it is still continuing, things of that nature?

Dr. Adkins: Yeah, so on the Spit for Science website, spit the number four science.vcu.edu (spit4science.vcu.edu) there is a list of papers that have been published by researchers here at VCU that are using the data. Um, the analyses I talked about today recently got accepted for publication. It's not out yet, but it will be posted there once it is. We have, once a semester, a symposium where undergraduate researchers who have looked at the data and done projects such as this can talk about their research. It's usually around the last day of classes. And that undergraduate research team, anyone can apply to be part of it. If you go to the Spit for Science website [spit4science.vcu.edu] there will usually be a notification when we're accepting applications and we take students from all majors and we love to work with students who get to look at the real data and answer questions using it.

Trisha: We have a lot of events happening this semester, and if you are interested in getting involved with The Well, one way that you can is to help us raise awareness about mental health and to prevent suicide by joining us at VCU's Out of the Darkness Campus Walk, taking place on March 30th, so just coming up really soon. The registration, ah you can register online, um, at our walk page, you can come the day of the event, we'll be checking people in starting at 9:30. This is taking place on the VCU Compass. So, you can create or join a walking team on our registration page. And the teams from VCU who raise the most money for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention through that walk page will also be eligible to win some cool prizes. So please come out and join us to help show your support and to learn more about resources within our VCU and our Greater Richmond Community to help support our students.

And thanks again for checking out What The Well. We're glad you are here with us this week, and,

All: Be Well!

[Begin outro song]

Be Well. Join us next time. Be Well. Find us online. Be Well. [repeats]