

--- Intro ---

You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

Today, we are continuing our conversation on self-care fundamentals with Dr. David Nathan, who serves as a primary care psychologist for children, adolescents, adults and families. Please join us in understanding more about self-care, getting things done and taking care of yourself.

--- Episode ---

Hi and thanks for listening. My name is David Nathan and I'm a Licensed Psychologist with Allina Health. I work primarily with boys and young men and their families on a lot of different issues they face. I feel very fortunate to be part of this project. Everyone in my family is a teacher; my parents were both teachers in St. Paul Public Schools. My twin sister today is a teacher at Johnson High School in St. Paul. It takes a special person to be a teacher. The fact you are listening to podcasts like this demonstrates how much you care about your students and your work. Thank you for doing what you do. I hope this will be useful for you.

Today is going to be the second part of my Self-Care Fundamentals discussion. How it works and why it is so vital for all of us.

Just to recap the first discussion, one of the ways I think of our mental health is to think about our mental capacity. We have capacity just like a cell phone battery; when we are at 100% or close to it, we're in good shape. When we do things we enjoy doing, we charge the battery. When we do things we don't enjoy, we use the capacity we have inside.

Once we get to about 50%, we start having various symptoms. They could be internalizing symptoms, like depression or anxiety; externalizing symptoms like getting into fights or destroying property; or they could be symptoms in our body, like headaches or stomach aches. It is hard to predict how any one person's body and mind are going to respond to prolonged stress, but everyone responds somehow.

Today I want to discuss two different approaches to dealing with difficulties in ways that impact our ability to take care of ourselves. Both of these approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. Both have times when they work well and times when they don't.

The first approach is what I call the John Wayne approach.

When I talk about the “John Wayne” method, I am talking about the philosophy that Marion Robert Morrison, who used the stage name John Wayne, portrayed in his films- really toughing it out, not giving up, no matter how difficult things are, and pushing as hard as we can until the very end. I think that type of approach is very useful in specific situations. For example, in high stakes, time limited circumstances the John Wayne approach is great. For example, if someone is studying really hard for their finals, because they really want an A, or if it is the championship game of the season, and you really want to win it for yourself and your teammates, or if you have a very big project due for work, in those very specific conditions, it may very well be worth really pushing yourself. You may get less sleep and may spend less time relaxing. You may be a really worn out athlete and your body may be sore and you just want to rest. But this is a specific situation that comes around rarely, and you have been working hard to get here. You want to do your absolute best during this opportunity. Worst case scenario, at least you know you gave it your all. Best case scenario, you are victorious. In these situations, the John Wayne methods is great. It comes at a cost though, and that cost is this is a very energy intensive approach to life. If we do this too much, we will burn out. No one can do it all the time.

I am not an expert on John Wayne, but I have heard that Mr. Morrison, had significant difficulties in his life. And sometimes, away from the public eye, he was not always able to just suck it up when he had to deal with difficult issues. And that isn't a criticism; He was mortal like everyone else. The point is, this image that we can use tough it out as an all purpose method to deal with life is an illusion. No one can do it all the time. Not even John Wayne could be John Wayne all the time.

So we shouldn't use the John Wayne method all the time. Sometimes, if we find ourselves in those specific, time limited, mission critical moments, then yeah- it is an option. But if we aren't in the right situation to use it, leave that tool on the shelf. So what can we do then?

Another approach is what I call the Gal Gadot approach. I suspect you probably already know who Gal Gadot is, but if you don't, she's an actor from Israel who has been in a bunch of movies. She's played the part of Wonder Woman several times recently. Before movies, she served two years in the Israeli Military. She also won the Miss Universe contest and is an expert in Jiu-Jitsu, kung fu and kickboxing. She's tough. She is also very funny. If you've seen Ms. Gadot interviewed, you know she really calls it like she sees it. A few years ago, one of my friends posted an interview with her on social media. The interview took place during a press tour for one of her movies, and to the best of my memory, it went something like this:

the interviewer was saying something about “it must be really exciting to attend these glamorous parties and awards shows.” And Ms. Gadot said, “actually, its not a lot of fun. They almost always start late, there is always amazing food there and you can't eat, there is always top shelf alcohol there and you can't drink, and there are a million people there with cameras so you need to be on your best behavior even if someone is really rude to you because you don't want to end up on twitter. And, its really cold.” The interviewer was kind of shocked, and she said ‘wow, that doesn't sound like fun at all.’ And then Ms. Gadot said “it's ok though. Some friends taught me how to do this years ago. These events are almost always on Saturday night. I go to the spa with my daughters and our friends and we spend the day getting back messages, sitting in whirlpools, getting our nails done, and getting facials. And by the time we are done, I feel like a million bucks. It makes the experience a lot easier. Sometimes we go back to the spa the next day.

I enjoy that story for a lot of reasons. In the game of self-care, Ms. Gadot is playing to win. She knows she is going to have to do something that she doesn't enjoy. It's going to be at night. Usually we're pretty tired and used up by the end of the day. Our battery needs to be charged. She has a strategy to recharge for hours before she goes out, she when things start late, she isn't at 40% of 50%, she's at 150%.

So many of the folks I talk to professional have significant concerns about taking care of themselves, advocating for themselves, and tend to put the needs of others ahead of themselves.

Sometimes it seems like we have so much to do that there is no way we can get it all done. And sometime there really is no way to get it all done. But we need to remember something really, really fundamental: if we burn out, nothing gets done anyway. This is really, really key.

The John Wayne approach is pretty simple to understand. Just tough your way through it. The Gal Gadot approach might seem more complicated to actually do it. How do we do it? And that is an excellent question. This approach starts with knowing yourself.

Knowing yourself means having some clear ideas about what you like to do and what you don't like to do. Know who like spending time with and who you don't like spending time with. Know what you have to do and what you don't have to do. Knowing what you have control over and knowing what you don't have control over. Knowing the difference between what other people want and need from you and knowing what you want and need from yourself.

And finally knowing yourself means knowing what is going on right now and knowing how you feel about it.

For some people, this sounds simple and easy. For other people, this sounds overwhelming and impossible. Some people may think these are silly questions.

I don't think they are silly.

Every week, sometimes every day of every week, I talk to people who tell me they don't even know what they enjoy doing anymore. Nothing seems like fun. Not knowing what we like to do is a sign of burn out. Even for people who aren't at that level of burn out, it can still be very difficult to identify honest and comprehensive answers to these questions. These are questions that most people cannot answer completely the first time they are asked. But they are worth knowing the answer to. In a second, I'm going to repeat the questions. Either now, or another time, you can write these questions down on your phone, on a post it, in a journal, somewhere you can get back to them. If you like, you can go back to where you have your questions and write your responses down when good answers occur to you. It might be helpful to write a line down the center of a page and have contrasting questions across from each other, on either side of the line. Let me go over the list again:

1. What are things I like to do/What are things I don't like to do.
2. Who do I like spending time/Who do I not like spending time with.
3. What are things I have to do/What are things I don't have to do.
4. What are things I have control over/What are things I don't have control over.
5. What are things people want and need from me/What are things I want and need from myself?

6. What is going on right now?/How do I feel right now?

These questions help us become more aware of our preferences, our mental state, our current situation, and how our mind is responding to our environment.

One way to think about how our emotions and feelings work is that they are like the lights on the dashboard of a car or truck.

The dashboard tells us when we need to get gas.

When we need to change the oil. How fast we are going.

If we need to check the engine.

They tell us what is going on with the car.

Our emotions tell us what is going on in our environment Like if we suddenly feel uncomfortable, but they aren't sure why. There is a reason we have that emotion. That's our emotional/experiential mind trying to keep us safe. If we suddenly feel relived or happy, something really nice probably just happened to us.

Going back to the dashboard metaphor, if someone covered up their dashboard while they were driving, they could keep driving their car, but they would not know nearly as much about how things were going.

They would not know when they needed to get gas or how fast they were going. Being aware of our dashboard makes it easier to drive our vehicles effectively.

One way of looking at the mind is that there is that emotional/experiential side of the mind, and an intellectual/book learning/someone told me side of our mind. They are both essential, and we need both to be successful.

The John Wayne method ignores the emotional side of the mind; its just about outcomes. Get on the highway and drive 5 miles. Drive as fast as you can; I don't care about how much gas we have or the RPMs.

Its clear to see how this method is good for getting really important things done, but that it can also get us into trouble.

But knowing how much gas we have, knowing the speed limit, knowing if we have to put air in the tires, helps us drive and helps us make sure the car is in good shape too.

If we don't know the answers to these questions, we don't best know how to read out own mental dashboard.

The first question, what do I like to do/what don't I like to do, gives us a sense of what activities help us relax and recharge and what activities take energy from us. We can use that information to think about our day and week and make sure we have a balance between the two. In the John Wayne approach, we don't think about this question. We just do what we are asked to do. In the Gal Gadot approach, we think about what we like, for her, going to the spa with her friends and family, and what she doesn't; stuffy parties where she needs to be on her best behavior in an uncomfortable environment.

The second question, who do I like spending time with and who don't I, is also important. I have a friend from grad school, Claire Hiedeke, that has a great quote: "some people are just more expensive than others." Its true. Some people take a lot of time and energy. Other people make us feel like a million bucks. Its helpful to be honest with ourselves about this.

The third question, what do I have to do/what do I not have to do, really gets into our understanding ourselves and our priorities. Knowing what is deeply important to you when things are going well makes it easier to get yourself those things when times are demanding.

The fourth question, what do we have control over/ what do we not have control over. There is a lot of stuff we don't have control over. Other people. World events. Covid.

Having an accurate sense of what we can and cannot control can help us spend our energy where we have leverage and avoid wasting our energy where we don't.

Sometimes we wish we had control over something we can't actually change.

Sometimes that wish can confuse us into spending time and energy to make that wish come true.

If we know what we do and do not have control over, we're going to be a lot less frustrated in life.

What do people want and need from me/what do I want and need from myself?

There are a lot of people who enjoy helping other people out. If you are a teacher or work in the helping professions, there is a good chance you enjoy helping others. That can be a source of fulfillment in life. But it takes energy to take care of others. Ideally, adults have balanced relationships with other adults where what we put in and what the other party puts in are equal. (This isn't the case for raising our own kids or even teaching kids that's a different podcast). If we are in unequal relationships, this is going to be a source of distress.

We need to recognize if our relationships are balanced. We also need to recognize if there are things we can't get from others.

If we can't get a need met by someone else, we need to take care of that need ourselves. Knowing what unmet needs we have and making sure we have ways to take care of those needs ourselves is a really important part of self-care.

How do I feel right now? What's going on right now?

This is critical. Our car dashboard tells us how things are going right now. Our emotions tell us how we are doing right now too.

Our minds don't tell us in clear thoughts, "I feel happy" or "I feel scared." Our emotional state tells those things. Different people experience these things in different ways. A lot of people are not in touch with their bodies and minds and don't know what different sensations mean. Sometimes we will have unique feelings or emotions that are specific to us. Other people can't tell us what they mean. We need to pay attention to how we are doing so we know what they mean. I have a friend who was in a house fire when she was a child, and to this day, when she feels scared, she feels hot. I have another friend who had a lot of surgeries when he was a kid, and to this day, when he feels upset, he feels cold; he told me he had been talking to his therapist about this and the therapist had pointed out that operating rooms are often kept cold so surgeons don't sweat; as soon as he heard that my friend felt something click. When some people are nervous they feel like their heart is beating fast. Other people may feel light headed. Some people, when they feel happy, they feel light. Other people say feeling happy feels like they feel safe. Mapping these things out really helps us know how we are doing at any one situation. One way to get a good idea of how our mind and body feels in any specific situation is to set an alarm on our phones one to three times per day. When the alarm goes off, jot down how we feel and what is on your mind.

We can use this information to learn, over time, how our minds and bodies responds to different situations and what those responses feel like.

Today we discussed some different methods to accomplish goals in our life, and ways to take care of ourselves when things are demanding and when things are more relaxed.

If and when we can do these things, we are in a much better position to take care of ourselves before, during and after we experience stressful situations. There are lots of different ways to deal with things. Sometime we need to use the John Wayne approach. Sometimes we need the Gal Gadot approach. Knowing when and how to use each helps us be more effective, healthy, successful and fulfilled in our lives. Thanks very much for listening. And thanks for doing what you do. Take care.

---Outro---

On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at www.changetochill.org. In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!