



Physical Wellness

with Dr. Russell Robinson, EdD & Dr. Toni Lewis, MD

Russell Robinson speaks with Dr. Toni Lewis, MD, the founder of Liberation Health Strategies. Liberation Health Strategies focuses on creating a collaborative community, national and global holistic health justice strategies. Dr. Lewis is a faculty member with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) and a yogi. In this conversation, Dr. Lewis talks about the impact of the pandemic and social justice issues on wellness, and some of the equitable challenges of wellness from the perspective of diversity and inclusion. She shares why there is wellness in rest, and how wellness can be viewed as a vibe.

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ABOUT DR. TONI LEWIS, MD



Dr. Luella Toni Lewis is the president of Liberation Health Strategies which focus on community, national, and global holistic strategies for health justice. Dr. Lewis is the immediate Past Chair of SEIU Healthcare, the arm of SEIU representing one million nurses, doctors and health care workers throughout the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. She joined SEIU in 2004 as a member of the Committee of Interns and Residents (CIR) of SEIU Healthcare. She was elected as the national president of CIR from 2007-2010. Dr. Lewis trained at St. Vincent's Catholic Medical Center when it experienced service cuts and imminent closure. She emerged from this crisis as an experienced and tested public health advocate devoted to health justice and the highest quality of care for all communities.

ABOUT DR. RUSSELL ROBINSON, ED.D.



Dr. Russell Robinson is the founder of Amplified Research and Consulting, LLC, which provides research, analysis and consulting solutions regarding employee engagement, voice and silence, and talent management. Russell's focus is helping leaders create a culture of learning and listening.

In addition, Russell has spent over twenty years as a civil servant within the US Federal Government. In his current role as the Senior Advisor of Training & Engagement of an agency's component, Russell provides solutions to improve the workforce experience; and help leaders inspire and influence those within their span of control. Additionally, Russell is an adjunct professor at American University where he teaches graduate-level leadership classes.

Russell received his Doctor of Education (EdD) degree in Human Organizational Learning from the George Washington University. He received a Master's in Public Administration from American University's Key Program, and a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration degree from the University of Dayton.



RUSSELL ROBINSON Alright, so I am with Toni Lewis with Liberation Health Strategies, how you doing today?

TONI LEWIS Pretty good.

RR Could you tell people a little bit about you and what you do with a Liberation Health Strategies?

TL So, my full name is Luella Toni Lewis, MD. I am a physician allopath and the last 15 to 20 years of my career have been spent at the intersection of medicine. I am a trained doctor in family medicine and geriatrics but also intersecting with labor. I was international vice president of healthcare union for about six to ten years working in space so kind of patient safety, workplace, wellness, health care workers, service worker life especially working through Ebola and tragedies and stuff is a key part of kind of my wheelhouse and learning, in terms of working with systems across the board in terms of workplace wellness. My personal journey is an internationally certified yoga instructor and a doctor, and a labor leader. Wellness is not just one thing. It's not just going to the gym or getting a manicure. No hate on manicures at all. Those people love to say is not just a manicure (laughs). Actually, manicures can be good for you. The reason why Liberation Health Strategies was birthed was because when I was a physician doing policy and political work in labor unions, no matter what I was doing or where I was going, whether I was in the hospital, I work on the Affordable Care Act or working on Ebola or talking or legislating, or at a hearing, people would pull me aside because I was a black woman doctor to talk about their wellness, burnout and stress. And it is people that look like me because they couldn't find doctors or yoga teachers that are curvy or doctors that were Black women, or whatever. And so, I kind of began building this practice of how to embed wellness in the workplace. How to think about wellness in your life and what that meant especially for folks for whom wellness has not always been afforded as even a luxury.

RR As a doctor as a labor leader and a yogi, it is the perfect time to have all three of those skills but let's do the academic thing for a second. So how do you define wellness? You mentioned a physical aspect, but then you also had manicures as an aspect. From your MD prism or whether you want to venture to the yogi side, how do you define wellness?

TL I define wellness as creating the space and as many ways as possible for optimum living your best life. Living your best life includes joy and rest, liberation, freedom, and pleasure. Creating that space can be everywhere from in a workplace, having less back-to-back meetings, and more days off. It could be an actual space, like a room or a retreat, or it could be money to provide some economic health and freedom. It could be aromatherapy. It's so much about creating the space with intention to move towards, living your best life, feeling well, being well, being joyful, and being grounded. It is funny how often I get asked this question in terms of what's the definition of wellness? Because there is kind of a wellness industry that in the United States a lot of time like vacations, retreats like wearing a certain size. It's very tied to kind of kind of a wellness industrial complex. It's tied to a you need to buy it or earn it in order to...and there's also an aspect of kind of wellness, for some folks that requires labor, and requires you to actively be doing a lot of things to support rest where for a group of people, like myself, who are always working. Really, less labor may be the thing that's needed which is why I'd like to expand the definition to creating an environment for that versus you have to do ten things to earn your wellness.

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The other thing that I think is fascinating, especially with the populations, I like to focus on for some depending on their experience in the United States, wellness has been something that not looked like them, or been afforded to them. Or even inclusive of traditional wellness techniques. I feel like wellness is a vibe and it is creating as many spaces as possible for living your best life.

RR It's beyond just the basic mental and physical and maybe weaving in spiritual aspects. It also sounds like there's wellness in not always doing. Like tangible wellness and actual rest.

TL In rest. Early on one of my mentors said think about it as mind body spirit career family and finance. Especially in this space.

All of these things require some rest to recover, and as people trying to work and exercise themselves, and, add in ten more things to do, I'm seeing more people crash.

RR People equate wellness in doing, doing, doing...and there is balance between doing and not doing.

TL Oh my God. One, the economy of this particular country, a lot of times that culture seeps into all of the things including wellness...go to the gym more...do more walks...do more meditation...do more labor. Even the human body has this balance of the parasympathetic and sympathetic system that just like fight or flight but this rest and renew. That part where their organizations like Nap Ministry and others who are talking about how important it is to rest as part of a good wellness frame. Especially in the context of historically asking people to work, harder to achieve their good wellness reward is quite a thing. And as a physician it's kind of like one of those things that's really worrying me the most about the health and wellness of a lot of communities as we come out of COVID because long-term COVID symptoms like exhaustion and grief. All of these things require some rest to recover, and as people trying to work and exercise themselves, and, add in ten more things to do, I'm seeing more people crash.

RR I use the terms of wellness and well-being interchangeably and I was actually thinking...are they the same thing? So, what's the difference between wellness and well-being, to someone who thinks they're the same?

TL Is there a difference? It kind of depends on the cultural context, right? Because a lot of times when you see it academically, you'll see wellness as the kind of the program, like the environments and the things that you're creating around getting well, and well-being as the goal. Or well-being, as the "how are you today?" I think of it as being, but in a lot of my I call them "the grand rising crowd", in my earthy wellness healer artist space, they're used interchangeably...wellness and well-being. So, a lot of times you will see wellness as operationalizing what people need to do to have well-being. You won't see a Well-being Department in organization or a Vice President of Well-being. You'll see a Wellness Director because they're kind of creating spaces. And well-being a lot of times is the conversation with the individual about how your well-being is.

RR So, I would so would Wellness be the marathon and well-being like where you're at mile marker ten. Where you're at mile marker twelve. Just very much like a snapshot of you on your wellness journey.

TL Quite possibly. Yeah, that's a good frame.



RR Can you talk about what you're seeing from people being overwhelmed and what the impacts are, but also what you've seen over the past thirty-three months of the pandemic and social justice challenges, crazy politics, war...just the state of everything that is impacting how people are presenting themselves at work and home...and how they feel about themselves.

TL It's wild. So, there's this graphic where there was a trajectory of how we heal in this moment. At first part of the pandemic starting with when you get COVID, and then you're in shock at this whole pandemic, and then you adjust. But then it quickly moved from people getting COVID to the pandemic to just the accumulation of all things. With COVID, there's isolation, there's grieving the death and the loss of loved ones, and the loss of life. There's kind of post-COVID symptoms, which can include the brain fog, and this not being able to connect the dots, and issues with mental health disorders and all of these different things where people are kind of dealing with challenges and all those areas. I mentioned earlier the mind body spirit career family finance—it's fascinating that we are beyond whatever constructs we previously used to address trauma. We've blown them out of the water because there's so many layers on everything and we're not in a post-COVID period for most folks. I know folks now who have COVID, and it's not over. And so that being said, folks' bandwidth is stretched, low and juxtapose that with kind of this psychological need to get back to normal and it's not working.

RR But is there ever going to be a normal? Or is there just a new measurement of normal.

TL It's just a new measurement of normal. A new measurement of a new steady state, right? We talk about steady states in science in terms of getting to a flow or equilibrium—a thing that you understand. So that part where folks are struggling with the “what is the new when there's not really a template” has caused a lot of challenges across the board. And we talked about everything from general strikes around the globe or, the great resignation to the great awakening—which I have heard, and people call it—to quiet quitting. All of these different things where people have been through this significant life event and are looking at life differently now, and/or have different bandwidth to do a job that they didn't have before is just it's a lot of shifts and have a lot of people thinking about life in a different way.

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RR So, when you're talking about being overwhelmed, I think a lot of people view, within the organization, that the organization experiences it as a monolith. What I have found is no one ever looks at the middle manager being overwhelmed as an individual employee and also as a manager. But there's also reports from Gallup that talked about loneliness is at an all-time high. Pre-pandemic loneliness was like one of the stressors at the CEO level. But then you also have employees where they're all experiencing it differently based race, creed, color, age, the ease and use of technology. Can you talk about this at different levels, especially when a lot of people view wellness in an organization solely as a monolith. And think that everyone in the organization is experiencing it the exact same way.



TL It's definitely not a monolith. And you mentioned, C-suite to worker level that if your wellness program within your organization, does not have a lens for equity and inclusion, you could potentially be doing more harm. I advise at all levels of different organizations. One example, I'm working with a group of say, thirty employees, and it is funny. I feel like saying I bet you think this song not about any one organization because there are trends across multiple (organizations). Let's say there are thirty employees and there are a few middle managers. A couple of them are Black women, and they text me offline to say they don't have the bandwidth for today because they had just heard that a seventh family member died of COVID. They don't want to turn on the screen because they're crying. Then you've got the rest of the folks wondering what's going on, or are they separated, or what is the support they need for wellness within that particular situation. Depending on the culture of the organization, if it's an organization where it's primarily Black women and Brown women, they may want to be in community together to have time to share resources. If they are one of the only ones, they may want time off to find their own resources or to be with their family.

So, there's examples of this happening at the C-suite, and the ability to be vulnerable and share that with the entire organization that you're feeling it, then likely others in your organization or feeling something. And how do you create the space for that to happen? And so, this whole "not a monolith" had (state) Commissioners saying they didn't know what everyone else was stressed about because people got to work at home, while they were the ones that had to come into the office. And we were saying that's not how this works.

So, they're all these different ways that people are experiencing this, and I feel one of the one of the best frameworks I've seen to help people kind of start to get at this the Institute for Healthcare Improvement and the AMA did a survey of health care workers early in the pandemic to ask what they needed at. It gets into joint meaning of work and came down to couple of categories like tasking workers at all of the levels including and C-suite needs support across organizations. I work with Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grantees, and we pull the CEOs together to talk about what they need. That's how their support happens. But this idea where you can ask it at organizational level which would be the most important thing to provide a better environment around wellness? Do you need to be heard? Do you need to be supported? Do you need to be cared for? But that can tell folks whether or not you need to give people more time off. Whether folks want something within the organization where people need training to figure out what's going on with burnout and stress. Understanding how many intersections exist within your organization and how you address them individually.

RR You made the case this link between wellness at all levels of the organization and really leadership development. As a leader or as a manager, you really need to be able to connect at a different level. Talk about some of the leadership skills that would be needed to connect with your staff, or to lead your organization in a way where it would foster different perspectives which would in turn lead to better, decision-making, asking better questions and better organizational wellness.

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and lead your organization in a way that serves that the
mission, vision, and values of your organization.**

TL The first thing and it is going to sound obvious, right? As a leader, remember you're a leader and intend to lead, and lead your organization in a way that serves that the mission, vision, and values of your organization. I'm on faculty at IHI (Institute for Healthcare Improvement) working with leaders across multiple hospital systems, and a couple of months ago there just became this, "we can't get stuff done, and we keep having people transition out of organization." The great resignation. At a certain point taking the opportunity to sit back and as a leader and say, "what do I see and what do I know, and then what can I do, and what can I shift to get the results that the organization needs in a sustainable way." Having that conversation with yourself and with other people in similar positions of power and access. That's a critical point because everyone is having to innovate now because they don't have the resources and people, or even the systems. So, connecting with other leaders to share the pain points and best practices is practical. For a lot of CEOs that I talked to this has been a lifeline because the isolation is a thing. You get people in a room for two seconds and do a word cloud on what are the things that are bothering you or what are your challenges and folks would like, we're all having



the same issue, and then all you need is one person to be like, “This is what we did. We took three weeks off or we did exit interviews to decide to figure out how we should shift our work plans better.” I think it is more about process and connections and innovation than it is about a specific five things because it’s different for every organization. It bridges both the conversation around leadership and the connection piece.

The question you had around leadership and the connection piece, right? Because that you know, and I’m thinking across the board, whether it’s workers, gig economy nursing home workers or CEO’s. This isolation piece of I am the only one dealing with all of this and I have to figure it out, and I do not have the bandwidth get kind of nursing home workers, you know, like whether it’s workers or CEOs this like isolation piece of like I’m the only one dealing with all of this and I have to figure it out and I don’t have the bandwidth to find the solution. Many communities or ecosystems that can be created for people to resource share is critical. And, then going back to the equity lens is extremely important here because sometimes you have the C-Suite and workers in the room because the power dynamics are such that folks won’t always speak up. One last thing on that is that getting people to share...it’s multiple points of entry. So, everything from surveys to word clouds, all those different ways that people can speak up and a moment that’s comfortable and safe for them. So, they get the real information that’s important.

RR I’m glad you mentioned surveys. And sometimes surveys are not the only form of data. You can collect data via word cloud, you can use check-ins, you can literally send the email to your staff or certain members asking, “What’s one word for how you’re feeling today?” And just see what the responses says.

TL You learn so much from that. I was doing some stuff with the AMA the other day, and someone put in the word “anxious” and as more people said the same word, it got larger and larger and there well, I don’t understand why people don’t like. So let me just as a physician tell you, if people are anxious, they’re less likely to tell you why.

RR Let’s say I’m a Chief Wellness Officer and I’m hearing this and realizing, “I’m preparing for a normal that will no longer come back. I’m realizing there are segments of my workforce that haven’t been included, I haven’t been aware of how the past 32 months have impacted them from a wellness standpoint.” You’ve talked about what you seen, and what it is...let’s talk about where we are going. What should wellness officers be focusing on?

The ability to listen and understand what the concerns are, and offer opportunities for co-creating, what people need and investing and then continually doing that is a critical thing for moving forward, because we really don’t know where we’re going.

TL They should be focusing on good listening, innovating, and investing. That top-down cookie cutter approach won’t work, especially considering that every organization, group of people, and a group of experiences is not a monolith. The ability to listen and understand what the concerns are, and offer opportunities for co-creating, what people need and investing and then continually doing that is a critical thing for moving forward, because we really don’t know where we’re going. It is the ultimate kind of research and development You need to kind of get more in tech and innovation mindset of asking the question, throwing money at it, measuring, and evaluating.

RR ...and if it shifts, you put a patch on it and update it.



TL Exactly. This is challenging for healthcare. The kind of evidence that's like 20-30 years old and needing proof that it's going to work. For wellness, we literally have to rest to find a way to put in rest, go back and check, did they get rest. What were the barriers? If managers need discussions that kind of thing. So, it's really but it's deep listening and that means for voices that have been traditionally marginalized or exploited need to be heard. Listen harder and you get more people to translate, and it also means you just have to throw your ego out the door because it's souls that we're dealing with. If you're really trying to operationalize care and if that's not been the modus operandi of your organization, you're trying to convince people at the organization that you're operationalizing here, and you mean it.

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RR Dr. Toni Lewis, Liberation Health Strategies, thank you very much. For all of these, all of these good nuggets.

TL My pleasure, my pleasure.