

Transcript episode 6:

Intro:

You are listening to the Undeniably Well podcast hosted by the University of Delaware's Employee Health and Wellbeing team. Keep listening to discover ways to be your best self each and every day.

music

Welcome to episode 6 of the Undeniably Well podcast. This is a special, 3-part Equity and Inclusion series. If you are listening to this when it is first released, you can expect to find the second part available November 29th and the final part December 13th. For our listeners who may be unfamiliar with some of the terms used, please check the show notes for some definitions. Additionally, you'll find a complete transcript of this episode and links to resources. This conversation may bring up some uncomfortable feelings depending on your own personal experiences. Please know that we have resources linked in the show notes. Thank you for listening.

Jess Pieper:

All right. Hello and welcome to Undeniably Well, my name is Jesse Pieper. I'm joined today with three guests in the Morris library. We are face to face and it feels amazing to see eyeballs and the 3D smiles under masks. So, today's conversation is going to be an open and honest discussion about racial traumas, psychological safety, mental health, and the future of work for employees of color. Some responses today are going to come from personal experience, some from professional expertise, and of course, I want to acknowledge the fact today that everybody's offering up vulnerability and this is sure to be an emotional discussion. So, thank you for the energy you're giving when energy is short for everybody right now, I appreciate it. So, we'll just go around the room, starting with Clifton, so you can learn our voices and go ahead and introduce yourself.

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

Yeah. So good to be here, Jess, thanks for introducing me. So, I'm Dr. Clifton Berwise, I'm a staff psychologist at the Center for Counseling and Student Development. I've been working here at UD and I just started my third year now.

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

Thank you so much. Jess. My name is Dr. Ogechi Nwordu, and I am originally from Nigeria. I'm a new hire at UD. So, I was here last year and then, took a permanent position this year as staff psychologist at the Counseling Center. Thank you so much for having me here.

Alyssa Benjamin:

Hi, my name is Alyssa Benjamin. I have been at UD since forever. I was an undergraduate student here, and now I work in the College of Health Sciences, and I run our Pipeline Programs and some of our diversity initiatives. And then I'm also a graduate student in the Health Promotion program, and I'm also studying a concentration in clinical health coaching.

Jess Pieper:

Welcome. Welcome. Thank you everybody. And I'm the wellbeing coordinator with Employee Health and Wellbeing. I've been at UD for about two years now. My background is as an exercise physiologist, so, yeah. Okay. Let's get rolling. So, to start, I should also preface, we've had maybe two conversations before this to chit chat a little bit, and had some really nice chats. Let's start with what fall looks like right now, the future of working at UD and we've all gone through the trauma of a pandemic and the trauma of racial injustice again in our country. So, what does coming back to an office or coming back to hybrid feels like right now?

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

That's a really good question.

Jess Pieper:

It's a big one. We are starting big.

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

I kind of want to tag Ogechi into that one because, she introduced this article to us. I mean, before, and we had a discussion about that this morning, specifically talking about women of color coming back to the office.

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

There are several articles about women of color that specifically do not want to come back to the office. And I am in one of those categories and the statistics are high that most women of color I will speak from me as a black woman, coming back to the office is coming back to microaggressions, coming back to pointing out my hair, coming back to just being that visible person where everything about you is always there. You don't have somebody to really join what as much. I am grateful to have Dr. Berwise in the office with me. Um, but as a woman of color, I don't have anybody else to really relate to, to really associate and being, being virtual, working virtually was really refreshing. Throughout there's nowhere I've worked where I have not gone through racism, bias, microaggressions, stereotype, you name it.

And so being virtual was the first time I didn't have to step into that environment. And so now being back, I kind of live in my own mind because it's not, it's not, I'm not happy to be back. I'm just fulfilling what I am told to do. And a lot of women of color are going their own ways because they don't want to go through this again because it's more than just coming to work.

And so, from that article, a lot of people are starting their own businesses, finding ways to not have to go through the same experience they've had over and over after you've had such a relaxing break from it. And I know that's hard to say relaxing from the pandemic, but it has been a breath of fresh air, so that's what I live in every day, trying to figure out how do I reemerge myself back in this micro aggressive, stereotypical bias, the environment of a workplace again.

Jess Pieper:

And I'm hearing, this is not new. It's not the pandemic. It's not 2020s events. This is.

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

No, this is not new. And you know, COVID is horrible, but it brought it out to the surface. Then now it's no longer something I just go into and niceness that likeness office where it's a pretend. Now it is outwardly. It is, as you've seen what is happening in society, it is not outward. It's even more aggressive, it's even more micro aggressive. It's no longer where you can even find any solitude, any, any type of a place to rest your mind, it's worse than it was before.

Jess Pieper:

So, speaking to that performative act of being in person on campus, what is different about remote work that gives you some relief, anybody able to speak to that?

Alyssa Benjamin:

I guess being at home, you just kind of, kind of, you're just letting your hair down. You're in your environment, your own personal environment. You're not being disturbed by, you know, your coworkers or people coming up to you and asking questions or you're experiencing microaggressions. Yeah, you kind of just, you're just relaxed. And we were talking about before, like the emotional labor of it all just like having to be on, while you're at work, you don't have to do that at home.

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

Yeah. And I think another piece, and I don't want to highlight, we're talking about this coming from a perspective of privilege in some ways, right? Because as being professionals, we can work from home where we recognize that because of the pandemic, a lot of people of color are essential employees and ain't never got that break. Right. So that's another thing. So, they get an increased exposure and things along the lines. Where now we're speaking about it from the word you were able to take some time away and now mandated to come back. And Ogechi, you mentioned this piece about like hyper visibility and being invisible at the same time. I'm making a shift on that, right? Because I identify as a black man. I recognize that with any space that I walk into, I'm going to be seen on this campus. Right. And at the same time, I may not be heard that. Like the perspectives I'm trying to bring to the conversation may not be understood and they may not be heard and not be listened to. So, it was a very isolating experience to feel like everyone sees you, but you are not seen at the same time. Right. And it also doesn't feel right. It's just now I had the time to actually have a little, a little break from that, working from home, being able to turn my camera on and off and still doing my job and not necessarily feel pressed by my coworkers. And I, we talked about hair a lot. That's no joke. Right? So, you know, women of color can change their hair as often as they want to. And other people always feel the need to comment on why is that? At home, I ain't got to worry about.

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

I'll pick up from what Alyssa said, that hair, it might be so small, but when you say you can put your hair down, you literally can just relax with your hair. Sometimes you have to have your hair certain way every single time to go, and just so you fit the mold. Just so you don't get asked, and you have to kind of live this life of hair where you just wish I can just go with this hair or that just, just have my own hair. it sounds so trivial to some people that hair is a problem in the workplace. But as a black woman, being at home allows me to just live in my own hair and be happy. There's happiness in that.

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

And you know, also this is literal and it's also a metaphor for this other thing that happens. Right? So, this recognizing that I, as a black person have to talk a certain way, talk about certain things, have to present a certain way. I have to dress a certain way in order to demand respect. And even then, I still may not feel like I'm getting right. So that might be something as hair that the clothes that we choose to wear. The casual conversations we choose to have, right? The fact that I may have certain beliefs that other people will just not even be able to relate to at all. And even though it can be a new perspective, and even if they are listening, it's still a reminder that you're a different and that in and of itself is hurtful and traumatic.

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

And when you say being on, that's a concept done, I would say a person of color can understand. It's not a concept I will really put outside of a person of color being on. And what does being on mean? It's one of the most exhausting things in a workplace. So, on top of trying to do your job, being, for me personally, my English used to be so much more eloquent. Just so it will fit the box of the environments. And I do not mind, but it's not always how I speak in other environments with individuals of color or where I'm more comfortable. You know, a lot of times people might know that code switching. When I am at home, I don't have to code switch like about what Dr. Berwise said, I can turn my camera off. I can. It's more about being comfortable in my own skin. And it doesn't mean I don't want to be around people. It doesn't mean I can't come in for a meeting or come in here and there, it doesn't mean any of that. It means where is it that I can thrive the best emotionally, mentally.

And that's, what's important a lot for, I can't over-generalize, but I would say for me as a black woman, that's what's important. And so, in more of society where there's a certain level of functioning, where everybody and environment is similar in so much, so many ways by skin color, by a different than, and then you bring somebody that has different culture, different way of functioning, and they must fit into that mold, that office mold. It's almost a requirement, but you don't take into consideration because I'm always the minority in Delaware. I'm always the minority in everything, like that's not even an understatement, so I always have to fit into whatever the majority has decided to do. And so, at some point it's just realizing that is it okay to have something that allows the minority to be able to have something for themselves. It's almost like this. No, we can't let them do their own thing. We can make it a certain different way because we don't do it for everybody else, but everybody else, it's not a minority.

Jess Pieper:

Now all of these conversations about equity, keep coming up. That's the goal, to be more equitable in the way that we're working, but for that to happen, I think that's why this conversation is so important on a predominantly white campus. And we have to acknowledge that most of our listeners are going to be white people listening, to have that understanding of the amount of work it takes to be at work. I don't think it's getting through to everyone right now. So, thank you for being honest and open about that experience. Since that is the goal, to have this conversation about equity, what do you want your peers on campus to know about how we can be more equitable? Is there anything you wish people understood more other than what's already been said?

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

That's a loaded question. So, the first thing that pops up in my head, and one I just want to just acknowledge that Dr. Nwordu was far more professional than I am. She keeps referring to me as Dr. Berwise in conversation. Can we be on a first name basis, but you know, bringing it back to your original question, it makes me believe, you know, first off it starts from a systematic context. So, thinking about the leaders, the supervisors, the managers, in a particular setting, for those of you who are listening to this context, how many staff of color do you actually have? How much do you interact with them and how much do you understand the experience? Right. When there are certain things said in staff meetings or group meetings, are you making sure that you're really hearing what they're saying before just moving on to the next person? How much are you making sure that your staff is aware of what they're saying before you can go to the next person and people might say like, isn't it like getting special treatment or tokenism and in some respects, it might be, I'm not going to lie about that, but how are you using that to actually empower your staff members? Right. So that's the first thing that I want you to be very honest and aware of. And it starts with leadership because for us as staff members, we don't necessarily always find ourselves in those positions of power. So, you need those in positions of power to advocate within. And that might just start off with listening to your staff representatives. Other people aren't hearing it, being able to name like, "Hey, you know, Ogechi, I heard you just say that. Can you just repeat that one more time? Cause I want to make sure that we all understand what you're saying." So not just using your voice to repeat what they said, but using your voice to empower them so they can repeat what they said, and that way they can actually feel like a sense of accomplishment and actually a sense of belongingness, which is also more important.

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

I'll definitely add to that and the flexibility. One of the things that, and I'm mindful not to speak generally too much, but also speak personally, is flexibility. There's this, like I said earlier, there's this notion that, minorities or people of color should fit the same box. Like you said, there's a lack of understanding that is not, you're doing them a favor. It's that there are different lives and there's different way of functioning. And there's no way you expect that this groups needs will match the majority's needs. So inevitably there's some level of flexibility that's needed based on this group's culture or functioning, mental health, emotional needs that don't, they're not wanting the same. So, when I say flexibility is to understand and hear like Clifton mentioned hear what are they saying they need. So, if returning to work will cause you, and it's happening, you will lose a lot of your BiPAP population. It's happening a lot. They are leaving out a fast rate because they've realized I don't have to go through this anymore. Like this, this is it's too much. So, what does it cost you to have that flexibility of the type of way they need to be come into work when they still get their work done? That's where we need to be focusing. So, you know, I'm always in environments where we have discussions and we talk about them and I am not a proponent of just let's talk. Let's talk. I need that understanding that being, having more of a virtual work life it's what's needed for the mental, emotional health, I can speak from me as a woman, as a black woman is needed. And we can try to avoid it. We can try to be team players as we have probably heard that we need to be, but it's not. You're gonna lose your very valuable, important workers that are important for the students. So we often forget that the diversity in the workplace impacts the students as well. It's not just our coworkers.

So that's one of the things that we, speaking as a university needs to keep in mind and as professionals, as an individual, with our colleagues and those who are in your, in our centers and different offices and making that a lot of places have been given the right to be more flexible, to be able to say, okay, what

do you need? Let's design it, but that's not happening. It has not, and we're not going to sugarcoat it. Everybody knows me. I do not sugar coat. I do not do elephant in the room. I am, I just can't do it. Many offices are not giving you that flexibility. I am a mother. I have a small children on top of that. I'm a black woman. That's a lot is being asked because how many do you have in your particular office? So inevitably we have to get to where we are designing a different type of work environment for our people of color.

Alyssa Benjamin:

And to piggy back on that, the other thing too is just like checking on people often, not when there's some like big thing that happened in the news, or a protest or anything like that. Just checking on them monthly or weekly, just to let them know that you care about them and their needs and their feelings, and just making sure that you're aware of those. Where are those things?

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

Alyssa, for that, I appreciate that. And cause sometimes most people will check on you after a microaggression,

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

George Floyd, Briana Taylor, everybody be sending out emails about everything.

Dr. Ogechi Nwodu:

But they act like is that more egregious, visible level that happens. It's just, I can, that we're checking on and checking on it beyond just like, let me do this because it's what I'm supposed to be doing because it's the next thing on my learning list of how to relate to my people of color.

Jess Pieper:

Which, I'm guilty of. I just did that following up from last week's events, I'm a white person on campus trying to go through the list and that's the thing I'm supposed to do, but yeah, that's that here yet?

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

And that's, you know, one of the elephants in the room right now that we don't say enough of it's like most white people will like, I, I read white fragility and this is, and, no, I need you to build a relationship with me. I'm not gonna do the, let me just try to learn and how to, no, I am a person. I am a human being just because my skin is not white does not mean you do not know how to build a relationship with me. So, I need you to actually work towards building a relationship.

However, that relationship is gonna be, if it's, we don't have to be best friends. But I am not just, what should I call it? Just when something emergent, like when something happens, that's when I become your visibility of care. No, me personally, I, I can be struggling every day with some things that are happening, I'm from a different country.

So, understand that we don't need people to make us feel good. So, I can't emphasize that point enough that you made Alyssa that it's, it's not a, you're stop functioning with people of color as like you have a

duty. No, make it your lifestyle. I don't want to be your duty. And so, you do it with your own relations. Why am I a duty? And that's how I feel sometimes. Like, I need to be handheld. No. I don't know how to say that enough. And then we get into the teaching and all that. No. So in your offices, basically my summary is that focused more on building a relationship with the individuals in your office, because then that's when you're able to know what they need and be able to advocate for them without them even being present.

Alyssa Benjamin:

Yeah. Increasing your social responsibility, so that way you can make an impact in the community as well, you know?

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

Yes. I'm sorry. I'm trying to hold myself together. There wouldn't be.

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

I mean, I just also want to echo the points that y'all were just making. So, like, as people, we are all social beings and we need social support and social networks. So, when we get to talk about like, how do we exist in these spaces? We need those genuine, authentic relationships. So, often we turn to those people who would understand us, who aren't going to make us feel like we're being crazy, or aren't going to make us feel so different. And you know what, if we actually have authentic relationships with people, white, black, yellow, brown, purple, orange, whatever, that might be a person that we turn to, like, it's not just the person who's going to hit me up, unless something crazy happened. It's the person who hits me up on a regular basis. It's the person who you sometimes have lunch with, it's the person who cares about my humanity. Right. And that's the piece that I want you to know care about us as people, as humans. And not just when something happens, like build a relationship where I actually want to share the good and the bad with you and I feel safe doing that. Or feel brave enough to do that. And also, no, I still might be angry because once I leave this space, even if you're doing all the right things I might still go to BJ's and someone's going to ask me if I work there, just because I'm standing there with a certain tie on pushing a cart, asking me if I worked there. So I might show up to work pissed off the next day, because that happened. It has nothing to do with you, but know that this is what happens for us in this world.

Sorry. So, you're doing a better job of holding yourself together. And I'm stuck. I'm not apologizing for it, but there is another piece I also want to talk about and speaking back to leadership and management. So, for your people of color who are on staff, there's often work that they do that you do not quantify. That is not showing up in assessment. That's not showing up in your supervision meetings. That's not showing up in whatever type of professional development that goes up, especially when you have other staff of color or. Right. there is a space that's being held. There's a mentoring that's been occurring. There's this support system that's being provided. And sometimes that might need the things that are numbers and quantified aren't being seen. However, that doesn't mean that the impact is the lesser than right. And that's also not being taken accounted for, in various positions. So, if I could just name an example, being completely transparent, Ogechi and I have a bond, like I said, I've been here for three years. She's making her, she just started or officially. And there's a lot of discussion that we have behind the scenes. And sometimes my supervisor might even be like, so you had two hours there where you

didn't see a client. What was that about? Well, I was making sure that your staff member was okay. That's a very difficult conversation. So that way she can still see clients, right.

Like that doesn't often get seen. Or sometimes it's like, yo did you hear what just happened? Like, can you believe that this was. Insert, whatever microaggression that just occurred. Am I crazy? Is that what really happened? Yes. That's what really happened. Let's talk about it. Let me provide you some space and support and that gets tiring. And then to hear when it's time for promotions or next level steps, and it's like, well, this is what the numbers are saying. What's going on? That doesn't necessarily add up. Yeah. Because there are other things that I'm doing that the numbers aren't capturing and that's not always something that's seen or managers or leadership are also aware that people of color are frequently doing.

Jess Pieper:

We had talked a little bit about mentorship to us, imbalance, especially with students on campus, looking for mentorship from people who have shared experiences. I'm sure that falls unequally, um, faculty of color, employees of color.

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

It's, you know, for new staff. And I think there was a lot of new hires this year when I went to the training on our, it looked like it was a lot more than typical. And it's hard to not go to the one black person that you see. It's just the reason you probably came is because they have that one black person. So you can at least have somebody there. So, I can imagine most for me, I'm used to only black spaces and there was a point I said, I'm giving that a break. I'm going to give that a break because I want as a professional woman, the farther you go up, the less black you might see. And so, it gets exhausting. And so, Clifton is right. I lean on him and to like help me bring down this gas lighter that just happened. Because you can imagine that we are just coming back where we haven't really been in the office too much. And I'm sure this is not one office or I'm sure most people are experiencing this. I'm sure there are professors that are tired. There are other individuals in so many different offices that are just ... that do all that mentoring lean in on that. Just having a circle of care of healing, of restoration for each individual, a BIPOC community that's within them. That is a full-time job

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

On top of their full-time job. And, you know, because we work at a University, we work at a place that has undergraduate and graduate students. Right. So, something that frequently comes up for faculty of color is not only do they have, you know, their primary advisees, which might be a graduate student. They may also have undergraduate students who feel most comfortable with them. They're not even taking their classes, but they see them within a member of the department and like, Hey, can I talk to you? This is what I have going on. How would I navigate this space? Right. They're getting phone calls at seven, eight o'clock at night from these students who may or may not be theirs and that shows up on a regular basis and that can shoot you some stress, right?

However, when you look at the contract and I don't know formal contracts and how they work out here, but I know in other places you look at the contract, you have a professor who's supposed to be teaching three classes, and it's supposed to be doing this research and it supposed to be producing these publications. How do you have the time and energy to do that? When you're teaching your three

classes, when you're mentoring these two students that are yours, and then you're mentoring these seven other students that aren't even your like, official mentees, right? How do you have that time and energy? You're trying to help them navigate the system and that work is often undervalued and not always seen.

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

And when you, that goes back to the whole promotions. So there was a point that I began to be mad at the first black or the first Latinx or the first, because you are managing all that and, you know, you don't have that many people to advocate for you to be able to get those promotions and to have that team, somebody who's, if you are a person of color and you're among the minority or just the one, what are the chances you're being eyed for that promotion? What are the chances are you're going to be at the table? No, you have to work for it. And on top of all those things you're doing, because you are the only of your of your diversity. I can't emphasize it enough. Of how we need to start realizing that individuals of color are living in a different life than, um, a good amount of our white counterparts in the professional life, in the university setting. I think that's one of the most important thing I want people to take out. The life are not the same and it needs to be acknowledged and there needs to be some way for, systemically, to give some adaptation. And I know flexibility's a big one right now.

Jess Pieper:

And this is the opportunity. This is the time to change the way that we've been working. We, we know that we can work remotely effectively. If we have that evidence, then this is the chance.

Outro:

Thank you again for listening to part one of our Equity and Inclusion series. I want to remind you to check the show notes for relevant definitions and to find opportunities to get involved on campus, as well as other resources that may be helpful. Part two is a continuation of today's conversation with a focus on self care practices when it comes to emotional labor in the workplace. Here's a sneak peek:

Dr. Clifton Berwise:

So if burnout is 80, I want to stop you at 50 or 60.

Dr. Ogechi Nwordu:

The proverb. It takes a village to raise a child. So what keeps me my wellbeing being. Optimal functioning is my village.

Alyssa Benjamin:

My faith, just going to church, praying and talking to God that also keeps me grounded. I really don't know how I've gotten this far, but I know it's all because of God.

Final Outro:

Thank you for listening to the undeniably well podcast. For all things wellbeing at UD visit our website, UDel.edu /wellbeing. There you can access our on-demand library, subscribe to our newsletter and see what's coming up to help you on your wellbeing journey. Until next time, be well.