

Dr Cheryl Talley

Dr Cheryl Talley is a psychologist at **Virginia State University** in the US, where she leads Project Knowledge, a psychology research project and intervention that provides students with the skills and confidence they need to be successful. In this podcast, she shares her thoughts on relationships, spirituality and the importance of knowing yourself.

Break the **podcast** down:

01:03 Could you start by giving us a short overview of Project Knowledge?

Project Knowledge is an academic intervention research programme. It started at Virginia State University, in which we were using near-peer mentors to investigate ‘what is it that could influence a student’s thinking about college so much so that it changes their behaviour?’ Now it has expanded to a local high school where we’re asking the same question.

The difference between it [Project Knowledge] and any other academic intervention programmes is that it’s based on a theoretical framework and is data-driven. That means that, as a research project, we’re always testing a hypothesis and we’re willing to change what happens based on what data we’re given.

01:56 I studied psychobiology. My PhD looked at rat models. But when I got to my current position, my students seemed so science-averse, which was baffling to me because I think studying the brain and neuroscience is the most fascinating thing anyone could ever think about doing. It is the universe being conscious of its own self. And yet, my students did not appreciate the inquiry at all and came into the class with all kinds of conversations that they didn’t like science, they hated math... So, I left off from studying rat brains and went to freshman students’ minds.

03:06 There were ten years and four children between my junior and senior years of college. But the benefit of that was, when I did go back, I was very driven to graduate with a bachelor’s degree. I really had no thought of going on for a PhD. And I couldn’t have done that without mentors and people who saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself

and encouraged me. From then, I realised the importance of that. You only need one person that can make such a difference.

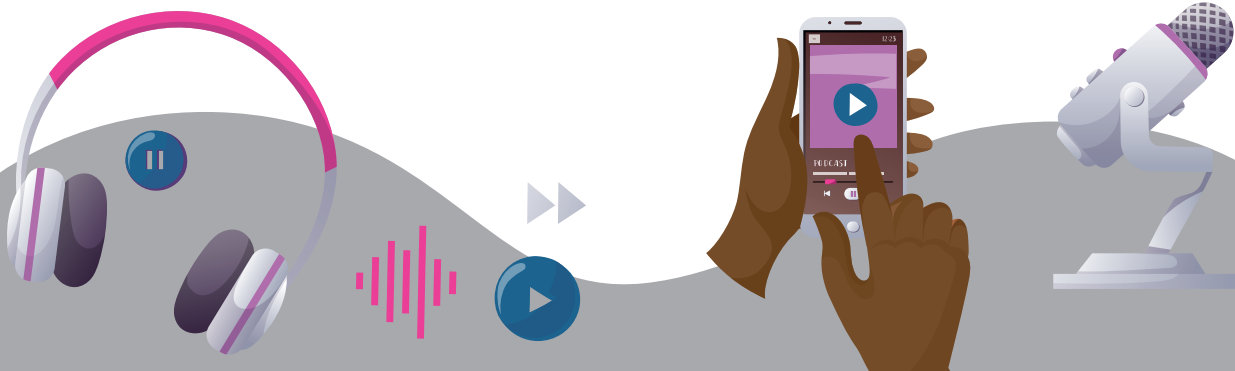
03:37 That’s a key part of Project knowledge, isn’t it? Mentors and mentees helping each other through school.

It absolutely is. You come into our programme first as a mentee yourself. Then, from that population, we groom you to mentor other people. And what it’s doing is it creates lasting bonds and quite a loyalty.

High school students are a completely different population, and I mean completely different. Those who’ve made it to college have navigated high school and have done enough to gain admission. But we have high school students who don’t have those types of aspirations. Some of them don’t have any aspirations or don’t believe that they could ever go to college, so we’re working at a different type of level. The mentors don’t have as much in common with high school students so we’re having to build from a different foundation.

04:36 What advice would you give to a high school student who’s maybe struggling to decide what they want to do next?

What we’ve learned from Project Knowledge is how important it is to have a relationship with someone that is very different from you. I know in high school it’s easy to stick around the people that are most like you or the people that are familiar, people that come from similar backgrounds. But with our high school students, they were learning so much just by being →



in a relationship with college students who had a completely different type of upbringing – coming from rural areas or suburbs or just coming from whole different cities. Having that difference and being in a relationship with them opens a young person's mind to what else is possible.

I understand though, it's scary and that's a lot to ask for a high school student. But for those who are looking, there are programmes, there are places you can go in which if you're willing, people will help you find those kinds of relationships.

06:09 I wonder if you could talk about the importance of listening to yourself and trusting yourself?

That brings me to what we actually do in that hour a week that we have with Project Knowledge. The mentors are charged to speak to them [mentees] throughout the week informally, but our formal programming includes meditation. I discovered during that time of commuting and being with myself for that hour, the importance of really delving into why you are thinking a certain thing. It's called metacognition. Not just to be carried away by your thoughts, but to inquire about what you're thinking. This is especially true when there's a challenge and you start to get these negative thoughts, like, 'I can't do it' or 'I'll never get anywhere' or 'things will always be this bad.' It's easy to get swept away by those and you know you're swept away because of the emotions that follow. But that ability to halt, just pause and look at 'why am I thinking this way?', to inquire, is a very, very powerful skill. And we teach that skill to high school students. This enables them to perhaps think of themselves, think of situations, think of other people in a slightly different way.

07:47 I was wondering if meditation and spirituality are a big part of how you think about the world?

Yes. The history of African Americans in the United States is rife with a lot of pain and angst. The whole slavery narrative is writ large in African American culture. But what also is very important are people like Harriet Tubman, who were able to grasp onto a higher power. I don't know how much of her story you know, but the fact is that she walked from Maryland to Canada. This was during a time when enslaved people could be caught and sent back into slavery. She took over 300 people with her over several years. She was led by what she says was a voice and light. That is what I thought about as I was commuting – the power that we have to access something greater than ourselves and the capacity as human beings to then be greater than we think we can be.

09:23 It's refreshing to hear about science, meditation and spirituality spoke about in the same place. I think a lot of the time, this stuff is seen as non-scientific or that it doesn't link up with that world. Would you say that it's helped you in your scientific work?

Yes, it has, absolutely. In my study of neuroscience, I realised that reductionist thinking can only lead us so far. Even neuroscientists admit that even if we know everything we need to know about one neuron, we will never understand how the brain works, which is connections with over

100 billion neurons. There's a whole other level of the way things interact with each other when it's done en masse. Big data has something to do with this, and machine learning, because we're understanding when you have the capacity to analyse large data sets, it gives you new questions and new answers that you couldn't possibly get on the level of just a few. I think the same thing applies in science. We come with a limited lens and the lens then causes us to be myopic, in that we can't ignore the actual phenomenon, the actual experiences of hundreds and millions of people who have experienced something that science can't explain. If science has the hubris to say it doesn't exist because we can't explain it, that's not the kind of science that I want to be involved in. We just have to admit that there are some things we can't explain.

11:23 What's one thing you would leave for our listeners to take away from this podcast?

In touching on that part about spirituality, it occurs to me that we do students a disservice by the way we school children to think of this dichotomy, as if this part of their life, the inner life, is somehow foreign to them being educated. When perhaps the inner life is the most important thing that one should gain in education. Perhaps knowing oneself is the purpose of an education.

I think if I had to leave anything out of this conversation, it would be to trust yourself and to get to know yourself. And there are tools that you can use even in high school. Journaling is one. Learning to spend time with yourself in silence, though this is hard for my students because they're always plugged into something! Taking some time just to be with yourself outside. Valuing yourself. This can be done with affirmations, giving yourself a message every morning – 'how beautiful you are', 'how intelligent you are', 'how hardworking you are'.

You know, there's so much negativity in the world that if you don't bring some positivity to your own self, who else will do it? So, you should always have a fan of one at the very least!

