

(Original)

Showing Compassion in Places Where You Don't See Yourself

Keoshia Worthy (host) 0:00

Welcome to "Invisible and On Stage," a podcast series hosted to you by me, Dr. Keoshia, Worthy staff psychologist at Columbia health, Counseling and Psychological Services. Please remember that although the podcast is intended to provide support is not a replacement for psychotherapy. If you are interested in counseling services, and are a Columbia University student on Morningside campus, please contact CPS at 212-854-2878.

Today's episode is on developing compassion in places where you don't see yourself. I am joined by one of my good friends Brence Pernell. Brence is currently the Assistant General Counsel at MDRC, a social policy firm aimed at improving public education in the lives of poor people. Brett studied at Duke University and then went on to obtain his master's in education at Harvard. And after that, he worked for a few years and then went on to NYU School of Law. After law school, he clerked for two years and then went on to litigate at a law firm here in New York. So maybe we could just start off with sharing, like how we know each other. Do you want to share that story? Or should I?

Brence Pernell (guest) 1:29

Sure.

Brence Pernell 1:31

Well, you know, I think it's pretty special. Because Keoshia and I actually go way back to elementary school, we both...growing up...in small town Blackville, South Carolina. We were in the same classes in elementary school, up until about third or fourth grade until Keoshia left us (Keoshia: Yes). And went on to go do her own thing and carry out her own accomplished career. And so what was it like last year?

Keoshia Worthy 2:07

Yep. Last year.

Brence Pernell 2:08

Last year, we coincidentally found out that we lived just a few blocks from each other here in Harlem, New York all the way from Blackville, South Carolina, and rekindled a friendship. And it's been beautiful since. It's pretty special.

Keoshia Worthy 2:22

It is really special.

Brence Pernell 2:24

But you know, to your credit, and to your point about networking. I think we, we found out that we live close to each other based on LinkedIn. (Keoshia:Yep). Yeah. And so you reached out and then I was really happy and excited to find out that you were here in Harlem?

Keoshia Worthy 2:40

Yes, yes, small world. But I, I felt like I had to start with someone who's from home. I wanted the first episode to be about compassion given the fact that 2020 has been a particularly hard year for my black and brown people. It wasn't the fact that it opened our eyes up, I think it opened the rest of the world eyes up to, you know, the, the long standing social disparities and in justices that black and brown people face. But I'm also thinking about not just that, but you know, COVID-19, and how black and brown communities are being diagnosed at a disproportionate higher rate, right. This is seen in higher rates of hospitalization, infections, and mortality rates. Again, I can speak for myself, I felt like living in a pandemic. I had to just really sit with my feelings sit with my thoughts, but also witness, you know, these, these killings, these murders on TV, and, you know, I'm not on social media. And I'm thankful for that. But sometimes it's hard to separate our identities and now put on the student hat, right, and trying to go back and, you know, perform well, while you're also dealing with your blackness and how other people view you. So, compassion for me, I think, is a key ingredient, I think, for healing for ourselves, and even for, you know, for certain students who are on the east PWI campuses. So, Dr. Kristin Neff is someone who's done a lot of work in self compassion, and she defines it as an attitude that is relevant to every personal experience of suffering. And that

entails three interacting components, self-kindness versus self-judgment, a sense of common humanity versus isolation, in mindfulness versus over identification. So she goes on and talks about these three components, but I do want to bring it back to you Brence and ask you like, what does compassion or self-compassion mean to you and how do you show it in your work with your friends with peers?

Brence Pernell 5:00

Yeah, well, I think for for me, at its core, it's about our ability to, to see ourselves and others. And I think that that, that ability to see (the) the commonality, I think, is important. Especially, I think across class lines, lines of race. Other lines about identity, I think our in ability to do so is the source of so much of bigotry and hatred and oppression in the world. And so. And that's not to say, That's not to say it's easy, compassion, that is exercising compassion. But I do think it's important. And I think depending on the context, the responsibility to show or exercise compassion is, you know, stems from, like, a large historical context that's not to be ignored. And so when we think about traditionally, folks who've been in power, and folks who have not, I think that this obligation to find and demonstrate compassion shows up a little different.

Keoshia Worthy 6:21

Mm hmm. Have you had any challenges this year with being compassionate towards the oppressor, just, you know, I find myself and I've heard this from a few people to just like, you know, after everything that, you know, happened over the summer, people are like, you know, they're still killing us, right, and really struggling with being compassionate towards their, their white peers or friends? Did that ever come up for you?

Brence Pernell 6:48

Well, so I can answer this in a few different parts. You know, the first thing I should acknowledge is that, so my mother is White. And, you know, for my life, my whole life, I've identified as a Black man with a White mother. And I think you could probably speak to this as well, for the short time that you spent in South Carolina, but also in the time that you spend in other parts of the South. I think growing up around poor White people (Keoshia: Mm hmm) is, is a very different kind of experience. And so there were many times in my life, where I, it was easier for me to connect with, and, or empathize with poor White people, given where I came from. More so than the, the white people, you know, I was regularly encountering at PWIs, and other professional spaces. And so. So I think that colors pun intended sure (both speakers laugh), in some ways, and so I think, specifically, I think it's allowed for me to,

Brence Pernell 8:02

I think,

Brence Pernell 8:04

even if I am struggling, if I feel torn, if I feel angry, I think there is sort of still this underlying muscle of mine, if you will, to connect with and identify with some of the experiences of poor White people, even if just from a class perspective. And so, so, yeah, just I wanted to acknowledge that and I think that that, of course connects to my own racial background. And family members I have, but I will say, I think that I recognize that, you know, we can we have so much energy, and the muscle to exercise compassion, I think can be exercised but so much. And as for me, I think I've aimed to focus my efforts more on having compassion for other people in the Black community, my family members and my friends. And that's not to say, you know, trying to find ways to extend compassion to folks who have traditionally been in power or White people or whoever that may be, depending on the struggle, but it's not energy that I necessarily have. (Keoshia: Yea.) It's not anything that I'm especially patient in doing and so I leave that exercise of compassion other folks. I think, for me, the focus has been more so on finding ways to show compassion to people who look like me.

Keoshia Worthy 9:47

Now, I didn't get into all you've done in your career. Do you mind sharing with people just you know, I shared a little bit about your educational experience, but I think the students could benefit from knowing about like, you know, what do you do as a career? What did you do after you graduate?

Brence Pernell 10:04

Sure. So. So Keoshia mentioned, I went to Duke, Duke was one of three schools I applied to,

Keoshia Worthy
Just three?

Brence Pernell 10:16:

Just three. You know, I know people who look like me, and who came from Blackville, South Carolina to go to schools like Duke. And so I applied to two schools in South Carolina and Duke was Duke was my reach school. And I was really excited and thrilled to be able to go there. I struggled terribly my first academic semester, and then found my groove and soared from there. And it was great. And I had a wonderful Duke experience. But I knew, you know, speaking of compassion, that I wanted to have a career that was about service to others, just based on my own educational experience, in rural, black, rural South Carolina. And so, you know, I thought that might look like teaching. I thought it might look like being a lawyer and doing advocacy work. And so, basically, I tried to do all of those things. [Both speakers laugh]. And so I went to graduate school afterwards, to get a master's in education and taught for three years after that, including a year in South Carolina, I went back home to South Carolina and taught in a context very similar to Blackville. [Keoshia: Okay]

Brence Pernell 11:27

...and then went to law school to try to find a way to weave my interests in race, education and the law. And so I went to NYU. And then I clerked for federal judges for a few years thereafter. And then worked for a year at a big law firm here in New York, just to get some experience. And also just to bide my time until I can sort of find the work in the nonprofit, nonprofit or public sector space that that I that I really wanted. And that came about through MDRC. So that's where I currently am and the beautiful part of it is that in the last year, I've gotten to it's been a complete circle. And I'm back in the in the classroom, teaching as an adjunct at a few law schools here, here in New York. And it's been great. I've been having a great time.

Keoshia Worthy 12:25

Wow, so much for a young man. [laughs]

Unknown Speaker 12:27

Yeah. You know, we're not too young Keoshia.

Keoshia Worthy 12:32

Yeah, young in spirit. [laughs]

Brence Pernell 12:33

There we go [laughs].

Keoshia Worthy 12:35

I do want to ask, what was the biggest challenge? You mentioned the first semester at Duke?

Brence Pernell 12:40

Oh, oh, boy. Um, you know, the big thing, you know, this is, and this is what I mean, on the class issue is that, I just felt like I...there was no one who knew where I came from. And it, it was just, you know, the black students, many of whom I'm still friends with, for the most part, not all of them, for the most part, came from especially privileged backgrounds. You know, they were talking about, you know, their summer homes and their parents being doctors and lawyers. And, you know, my parents barely had a college education, you know, they got like an associate's degree. And so it was just a completely different experience and created some, I think, difficulties for me, in terms of me feeling like, I was smart enough to be there. Whether I belong there, whether I was wealthy enough to be there. You know, I, you would look at the student parking lot. And you know, I remember my red 91 Ford Explorer [Keoshia laughs], that I've driven all through high school, and then after that, it's just like, lines of BMWs, that the other first year students, these 17/18 year olds, and I remember, my parents dropped me off, and they saw all of those cars and they shook their head, like we don't know what, what this is about to be for you. But hey, yeah, and I and I, I cried home, I was like, Mom, I think, you know, I'm just not smart enough to do this. I think I need to just go ahead and transfer to Clemson or USC, instead of embarrassing myself. Now, mind you, this was despite the fact that I had gotten a full scholarship to Duke, none of that mattered to me. I felt I still didn't feel like that was enough to demonstrate that I was smart enough to be there, that I belong there. And, you know, I was just really psyching myself out and to my father's credit, you know, he's he told me you're going to stay right. And you're gonna stick it

out. And, I mean, the other two smaller things is that I was also this is the first time in my life that I was challenged and that I had to except the fact that I wasn't the best at everything.

Keoshia Worthy 15:03

But you graduated valedictorian?

Brence Pernell 15:04

I did, but you know, of a 53, you know [Keoshia Worthy: jokingly says "It doesn't matter."], and so, you know, really small, but I was not used to being challenged. And, and I think this was the first time that I, my, my worldview was really being challenged i] and I think really, ultimately, really productive ways, which I now appreciate. That was a one of the things, but the other thing that I think gave me problems was the fact that I was not being myself, I showed up at Duke, like, I think 90% of the first year students wanting to be a doctor, even though I had no interest in being a doctor, I just thought that that's what success looked like, you know,

Keoshia Worthy 15:50

I see that all the time.

Brence Pernell 15:51

It's right, I imagine you do. And so as soon as I realized that, that's this is not what you want to do, my experience completely changed. And in the process of that I did meet someone who was from Orangeburg, South Carolina, who I accidentally discovered and my that also helped tremendously. One of the few who would also meet made it to Duke and from a very similar environment as mine, and I was just so...I felt so blessed to have been able to connect with her. My guard came down so much, my mother called her and thanked her and just like he changed my son's career. (Keoshia Worthy: Aww.) And it was just because I needed a friend, honestly, who came from a background that was similar to mine.

Keoshia Worthy 16:35

You know, I think what you're talking about with their first semester sounds like imposter syndrome, which I here (Brence Pernell: Absolutely!), you know, that's just I think it's common for especially black people, but black students, you know, when they are feeling challenged and feeling out of place, right to second guess themselves, even though you had this scholarship, that prove that you deserve to be there, but you still second guessed yourself. Yeah, thank you for sharing that I, I do notice, because we are talking about compassion, that you are able to kind of bring it back to yourself and show compassion towards yourself. And I think your friend helped you with that. Like finding who you really are what you want to do. I always tell like, you know, the students that I work with, like community is so important, and especially when you're feeling alone, it's nice to have someone. So law school was a breeze.

Brence Pernell 17:23

No, you know...

Keoshia Worthy 17:25

Why law school? (Brence Pernell: laughs)So, first of all, because I think a lot of, you know, just I'm trying to speak on behalf of the students that I've, you know, worked with or encountered in, or just people in general. A question that I get often was like, how did you know like this, like, I How did I, How did you know that you wanted to get a PhD? Like I know, part of it is like you want to give service to give back. But how did you know that education? a master's in education wasn't enough that you had to go on to this other route?

Brence Pernell 17:56

Yeah, okay. Yeah, I can answer that question first. I think it's a I think it's a good one and especially useful for, for students. I, I think I was taking it sort of one experience at a time. And in in Duke at Duke, I felt especially passionate about education. So I wasn't entirely sure what I'd do after that, but I knew before I did anything I wanted to teach. And so...So yeah, I I also knew, however, that I wanted to be a good teacher. And so I felt like further academic preparation would be useful for that. But if we're being honest, I also recognize that there are certain names that carry weight in the, in the professional community. And so it became clear to me that Harvard was one of those names, as it related to graduate schools of education. And so I, and I was fortunate enough to win a fellowship to help pay for that. And so. So yeah, I was at Harvard. And then I taught for several years. But you

know, it was while I was at Harvard, that I realized that I think the kind of impact I wanted to have, it felt like a law degree was more conducive to that than another professional degree. I considered, you know, in it, like an Ed.D. or a PhD in education or sociology or something that would allow me to study educational systems. But I think I wanted more. I wanted a more immediate impact. I wanted to be able to file lawsuits [Both speakers laugh], out of anger and frustration, to remedy what I thought were, you know, pretty severe injustices in our school systems. And so granted, I am not a litigator now, but that's what informed my initial desire to want to go to law school. And so, and to your earlier question, you know, law school was not a breeze. So I get to NYU, and I, I'm there with a Duke degree with the Harvard degree, with teaching experience, and imposter syndrome is there just as strong as ever? (Keoshia Worthy: Yeah). And I think what I've come to understand it, that it just doesn't go away, does not it does not go away, I sit in front of my students still feel it? You know? I'm, like, I don't, you know, they're gonna find me how they know, I don't know what I'm talking about. And I think to, you know, I think to your, into the, to the first very first question, um, you know, what, what we want to discuss here is, as it relates to compassion, I mean, I think that's one of the been one of the big lessons for me, is that I've been disappointed in myself over time, sometimes, that I still wrestle with imposter syndrome, I felt like there's so much energy expended, that could be, you know, it just, it creates stress, I could be using it, you know, experience and feel joy and peace, peace of mind. But I don't, and I think, from the point of compassion is that, it's okay, if this never goes away. And that doesn't say anything about you, or work that you need to do. And that, in fact, most people experience this, it's not just, you know, people of color. It's also, you know, she spoke about women feel it, even a lot of, you know, your, your traditional straight white men feel it. And oftentimes, a lot of the, you know, the, a lot of the behavior you see exhibited on their part, is sort of overcompensation because they like it, you know, and so this is one of the things that unite us, unites us as humans. We're all struggling with this. And I think that that helps me, it relieves the stress a lot. So like, we're all sort of struggling with wanting to belong and feeling like we don't belong or don't deserve to be where we are.

Keoshia Worthy 22:28

Yeah, I think that also goes back to what you said, you were able to connect with the poor white people just based on like those circumstances, and you could provide compassion towards them because you have the shared experience. But that also relates to this imposter syndrome, right? Like where, at least in my work as a therapist, I can be frank, you know, like, you know, it's Yes, a huge part of the work is about relationships. And so I hear a lot of different things, but it's about finding, even if you can't connect with the person, right, it's about finding that one thing that you can empathize with them, right, like whether it's, you know, being lonely or being feeling really down feeling hopeless, or just having this imposter syndrome. Like that's something that we all share that we all struggle with. And I think like what you mentioned, is just being able to be kind to yourself and normalize it. I think that's just the huge thing with imposter syndrome. Like everyone feels this. All people feel it, all genders all, you know, all races, we all struggle with it, but it's something I know, we're jumping into a new topic here, but I do think is relevant to just a trajectory of like, you know, your, your experience as a student. And it also does relate to my experience, because I remember, before we started, we were talking about like, oh, how can I say this? And you were like, see, see that? [both speakers laugh] You know, I was nervous and feeling like, you know, am I gonna be good enough for this? and stayed, you know, prepared all week, all yesterday. But you're right, like, I think we all at some point feel like imposters, (Brence Pernell: yeah.) , I've learned to accept it and just kind of move on. But that's the way I show compassion towards myself just kind of validate. You know, it's coming up for me. But here's all these things that I've done. The end of the day, I still work at Columbia. And I'm like..

Brence Pernell 24:22

That's it. (Keoshia Worthy: Yeah.) That's it. I mean, I thought that one of the best ways that I thought I read about sort of dealing with it is treating it as like a guest at a dinner table like that. And it's like, Hi, imposter syndrome. I see you, you can have a seat. Now, you're not gonna dominate the conversation, but I recognize you're there. And I'm not gonna pretend like you aren't there. But there are other affirming and productive emotions, also at the table, and I'm going to focus my time and attention on that. And so, yeah, you know, we I've accepted that it's sitting at a lot of people's dinner tables. Yeah.

Keoshia Worthy 25:00

I think it's probably sitting with us right now. [both speakers laugh] We see you imposter syndrome. [both speakers laugh] Okay, so my next question and I guess this is more related to racism related stress, and I think this ties in to being able to whether that be show compassion towards yourself or to other people do you think, well at first Have you ever experienced any racism related stress?

Brence Pernell 25:28

I'm sure I have. I'm sure I have. [laughs] You know, the reason I answer it in that way is because I am a firm believer in the fact that we are probably all, all of society, I think, is experiencing some, some sort of stress related to racism, whether it be on the inflicting in are on the receiving end, you know, Brian, Stephen, who was my professor in law school, and one of my professional crushes. [both speakers laugh] You know, he describes it as sort of, like smog in the air that affects us all, whether we realize how, how it's affecting us or not, even if it's not entirely visible and so. So yeah, I think it affects all of us. Now, in terms of specific instances that I face, sure, I mean, I'm sure it's come about, I think that it's been interesting in my my career, in that I feel like we are of the generation where, you know, racism shows up and I think in a lot more subtle and sophisticated ways. And so I think one of the stressful parts about racism is that trying to convince ourselves that it was because of racism, absent any knowledge I had, it was like explicit discrimination

Keoshia Worthy 26:57

I feel like snapping [referring to snapping fingers] right now.

Brence Pernell 27:00

So you know, you want you like winding yourself up wondering like, what was this related to race? And you know, you, you're feeling crazy? Because, again, no one said anything directly, or did anything directly? But yeah, I can, I can think of several instances, both more individual base and systemic that I thought was contributing to, you know, to ultimately maintaining a system of White supremacy. And so I'm sure we all can think of (Keoshia Worthy: Yeah), instances to that effect.

Keoshia Worthy 27:32

What would be your advice for students who are experiencing this on campus or in classes, especially? Maybe they are noticing it through Zoom, right? Where people just kind of shut off their cameras when they speak or aren't giving them eye contact? Or just kind of, I guess, doing these more subtle gestures of just kind of looking away or being distracted? Or just what would be your advice for students?

Brence Pernell 27:58

Well, you know, one of the things I think I wished, how do I frame it? One of the things I think, I wish I took more advantage of is what it meant to have black professors.

Brence Pernell 28:22

And I think, you know, coming from where we spoke about where I come from, in South Carolina, I did get to Duke, I thought professors were gods, I thought they were like, untouchable. [laughs] And so, I think that for that reason, I both, I both worked really hard to try and impress them but also was really intimidated by the idea of trying to get to know them on a more personal level. And and Now granted, I you know, I only teach, teach as a as an adjunct, but I will say that on the other side of it, you know, leading a classroom at a university. Professors are just, they're human. They're human. And I think Black professors, or Black teachers, or lecturers, or whatever, I think are often times very sort of open and excited by the prospect of having these kinds of conversations with students and wanting to support them in this way. And so now, we can also talk about how I think, you know, black professors and teachers and university spaces oftentimes feel overwhelmed when they're one of the few at these institutions. (Keoshia Worthy: I was just having this conversation with a colleague.) And all of the, you know, black students or other students are reaching out to them for mentorship and or support. You know, I don't talk about sustainability issues. Sure. But ideally, you know, there would be enough Black teachers on university campuses who could help support students in that way. And I think the reason I think is it was especially when it did happen informally. I thought and it happened, I think much more I think later in my career. And then early on at Duke. I was just, it was just nice to have someone who was in a position of power, who recognized what I was going through. And even if they didn't ultimately have the solutions about what there was to be done, you felt affirmed in your experience. And I mean, I think going back to earlier, what you what you were saying, or what we were talking about is like, at least in the end, you didn't you knew you weren't crazy, you weren't making this up? And I think, you know, there can be a lot of stress, stress just related to that. And so, yeah, you know, in my, my, the latter stages of my career, it's been very affirming to hear from black lawyers or black professors who talk about the experiences, they still face situations, and so are the imposter syndrome, they still have. And that's always been very affirming for me, because I situate that with the success that they've ultimately had and recognize that, okay, it happens, and I feel firm, affirmed in my feelings about this happening to me, but it doesn't necessarily dictate my success,

Keoshia Worthy 31:33

Right. But it's something I don't know if you ever felt this way. But it's like, sometimes I want it to be over, right? Like I want it to, I don't want to feel Black or feel invisible as it goes back to like my title, right? You would think that I know, like, you know, talking to my mentor, and I'm like, do you still feel this way? Do you still have these struggles? And she's like, Yes, this will never go away. You know. And I think that's the, especially for younger students. I think that's the the biggest challenge for them to accept. And like acceptance is key like that you will always, you know, have these feelings like imposter syndrome feelings, you will always and maybe I'm just speaking for myself, like I will always be seen as the black woman in the room. Right. And because of especially that identity in itself, that brings on the feelings of imposter,

Brence Pernell 32:31

right? Yeah.

Keoshia Worthy 32:32

But I try, I guess, going back to compassion, which is what this is, this episode is about like I, in my own experiences. I try to be thoughtful and what I say and how I communicate, even in this experience, when those you know, as we mentioned, the imposter syndrome is here as a guest sitting with us in Brence example. So I always try to be careful and how, again, like how I communicate myself, but also making sure like I'm comfortable, and not being overly anxious as I was when I was like in graduate school. I think that was the first time I've had the experience that you shared with at Duke when I went to Seton Hall, because before then I was at HBCUs.

Brence Pernell 33:17

Right?

Unknown Speaker 33:18

Winston-Salem state university have that in there? Okay. But yeah, so those experienced your first semester, so you were like, 17/18 I didn't have that experience until, like, 25. Wow. You know, so later on in life, definitely a culture shock. But, um, like those challenges, you know, it was it was a tough time for me. Yeah.

Brence Pernell 33:43

Yeah, it is. It is really tough. And I think about students in today, and I have wondered about whether, whether what being mostly are all virtual, how that's affected that dynamic about being one of the few black bodies in the room, because it's less I thought about whether it's less tangible now whether because you are, you know, interacting so much over screen maybe from home around maybe around more people who look like you whether it be roommates or family members or whatever. Whether that's helped in some way, you know, mitigate against I think some of that stress and maybe not but you know, I it was that was one of the more stressful parts for me and I do feel it a difference now. The organization I work for is predominantly white, and it does feel very different now. Not being in an office with surrounded by so many white bodies, in terms of feeling, you know, like I'm the one or you know, feelings about impostor syndrome coming about. I mean, it's definitely still there even in just emailing back and forth to be physical. But I do wonder about how that's changing things?

Keoshia Worthy 35:09

I think that's a good question. I feel like I do speak up more in certain meetings. And it may have something to do with like the comfort like, my dog can come and you know, talk. Right? I have this curveball for you. Oh, okay. All right. I call this segment "Flash from the Past." [sounds of harp playing] Alright, so I am going to read several prompts to you. The first one is like this or that right? And then you choose. And so it's called "Flash from the Past" because I want you to think about, like, how you were as a student. Okay. Then the second prompt is, I'm going to start a sentence and you're going to finish it. Okay. All right. So this is you know, all about your the first part, again, is all about, you know, whether you this or that, you know, as a student and then the other is what would you tell yourself? Okay, okay, are we ready? Yes. So I have this fun music to [graduation music plays in background for the duration of this segment]

Brence Pernell 36:11

Let's do it. Oh, I'm going to cry. [referring to the music he hears]

Keoshia Worthy 36:12
Aw, don't cry Brence. [said softly] Exams or essays?

Brence Pernell: Essays

Keoshia Worthy : Individual or group projects?

Brence Pernell: Individual

Keoshia Worthy: Study ahead or cram?

Brence Pernell: Study ahead.

Keoshia Worthy: Oh, look at you. Did I study? This is about you. I'm sorry. Snapchat or Instagram? [Brence laughs]

Brence Pernell: Instagram.

Keoshia Worthy: Books or movies?

Brence Pernell: Books.

Keoshia Worthy: Night Owl or early bird

Brence Pernell: Early bird

Keoshia Worthy: Follower or leader?

Brence Pernell 36:37
Fleader? [both laughs]

Keoshia Worthy 36:41
Fleader...[both laugh] I like that, I like that. On time or late?

Brence Pernell: On time

Keoshia Worthy: Front or back of class?

Brence Pernell: Back.

Keoshia Worthy: Did you go out on Friday night or did you stay in?

Brence Pernell: Stayed in.

Keoshia Worthy: So this is, I was trying to think about our when we were in school who were popular and so I couldn't really I don't know what kind of music you listen to. But here's something that comes up. Usher or Chris Brown?

Brence Pernell 37:01
What did you say?

Keoshia Worthy 37:02
Usher or Chris Brown?

Brence Pernell: Oh, Chris Brown.

Keoshia Worthy: Okay. Okay. Texting or talking?

Brence Pernell 37:08
This is now or as a student?

Keoshia Worthy: As a student.

Brence Pernell: Oooh talking.

Keoshia Worthy 37:11
Okay. You're a texter now?

Brence Pernell: All the way.

Keoshia Worthy: All right. So what would you tell your younger self, if you were in school still, whether it be graduated or undergrad. Never forget to...

Brence Pernell 37:29
Devote at least one weekend day to work.

Keoshia Worthy 37:36
Be open to...

Brence Pernell 37:39
meeting people who come from different backgrounds.

Keoshia Worthy 37:44
And don't be afraid to...

Brence Pernell 37:47
seek out mentorship and support from professors.

Keoshia Worthy 37:50
Awesome. That was so perfect, we finished, we timed it (referring to graduation music) with the music. [laughter from both]

Brence Pernell 37:55
Also I'm revising it's definitely Usher, not Chris Brown.

Keoshia Worthy 38:00
Why did you?

Brence Pernell 38:02
Because I realized I know so many more Usher songs, than I do Chris Brown songs. Yeah, especially back back then.

Keoshia Worthy 38:07
I used to have like a little mini crush on Chris Brown.

Brence Pernell 38:10
I've heard about it. [both laugh] Yeah.

Keoshia Worthy 38:16
All right. So let's just, you know, do you have any tips for students? on, you know, students who may be struggling with self-compassion or, or and or compassion towards other people? Like, what would be your advice?

Brence Pernell 38:31

Well, I think that, um, you know, I think it connects back to several of the things we've already discussed. I think one of the most important lessons I learned was that everyone, everyone is struggling with acceptance. And I think that that is manifesting in different ways. And that in some ways, we're sort of all coping in that way. And so you know, you, you know, you think about the person who arrives with a very macho personality. I think that's a form of coping or overcompensating, you think about the person who's really quiet in the corner of the classroom. That's a form of coping. And so I think the commonality is that we're all coping just in different ways. And I think that how we cope is just informed by our past experiences and traumas. And so I find that very, to be of great relief, because I think for for a while, I believe that some people just had life figured out, and that they were just very confident and knew their way about the world. And one can still be confident, I think, and still be coping. (Keoshia Worthy: Yes). And so I would say that I think the second thing is just to one of the there's a psychologist at Stanford, Carol Dweck, whose work I think in the education field, really, I think revolutionized my way of thinking about learning and teaching. And she introduced these terms of having a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. And she talks about how, her research speaks to how what oftentimes account, what can oftentimes account for the success of students is that those students who are successful tend to view obstacles, or frame obstacles or challenges as something that can be ultimately be mastered. And it's not about having an innate ability, which is what a lot of the fixed, fixed intelligence mindset, students tend to think that I'm just not good at math, or I'm just not good at science, or I'm just not good at sports. But from a growth mindset perspective, it's just like, I'm not good at it now. But with enough practice, with with enough diligence and hard work, even if I'm not the best at it, I can get better at it. And I think that approaching problems approaching intellectual tasks, trying to exercise that muscle more is like, I'm not good at it now. But I could be if I wanted it to be, it's just about enough discipline, practice and hard work to get there. I think that that's important for for students to try to tap into more, and that is not about, you know, just having natural abilities, necessarily that that lend themselves to being able to accomplish certain tasks or do certain things.

Keoshia Worthy 41:39

Thanks. [Brence Pernell laughs] I'm going to share a few of my tips. The first one is to provide grace. I think maybe this is just from my spiritual identity. I think sometimes we can be too hard on ourselves and I think that we all can benefit from being more kind to ourselves; giving ourselves more grace. The other thing is, just being more mindful. That doesn't mean that we have to meditate. It's just, you know, being more aware of our thoughts, you know, using our observing mind, and taking, creating some distance from our thoughts. I think, at least in my experiences. I don't know if Brence, if you can relate, but sometimes when those like negative thoughts come I can latch onto them, I can spiral, instead of creating some distance. And saying, hmm, I wonder why my mind is going in this direction. And I wonder what these thoughts mean about me, about the situation. Being more curious, like having more perspective. And I think if we could do that, we can start to not only have, show compassion towards ourselves, but to other people. And the last thing, is, you know, being patient. Many times people come to therapy and I always joke, and say I don't have a magic wand for you to better after this session. You know, change takes time, I think we're face obstacles at various stages throughout our lives and sometimes throughout the same year, but just be patient to yourself. And just going back to being gracious or providing grace towards yourself. I think a lot of times we don't treat ourselves as good as we treat other people (Brence Pernell: Um hm.). [outro music begins to play] And so just turning that inwards would be my tip for being more compassionate. Did you have any last thoughts Brence?

Brence Pernell 43:29

No, I thought that was beautiful.

Keoshia Worthy: Aw, you're so sweet.

Brence Pernell: I'm going to apply those tips myself.

Keoshia Worthy: Aw. [both laugh] Well thank you for coming, I'm so happy to have you hear. I share this with my mom all the time, my mom asks about you all the time by the way. (Brence Pernell: Aw.) She's like have you see Brence? I'm like yes [both laugh]. And shout out to my mom because she is the reason why we connected. She sent me a picture of us when were like in first grade. [Brence laughs]

Brence Pernell: Thank you Keoshia, it's been a pleasure.

Keoshia Worthy: Alright

Keoshia Worthy 44:02

Thank you so much for offering up your time and spending it with me. If you are a Columbia University student on Morningside campus and today's episode left you feeling like you could benefit from talking more about this topic with an expert, please do not hesitate to call CPS at 212-854-2878. [outro music ends]

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>

(Edited)

Episode 1: Showing Compassion in Places Where You Don't See Yourself

Keoshia Worthy (host): Welcome to *Invisible and On Stage*, a podcast series hosted to you by me, Dr. Keoshia Worthy staff psychologist at Columbia health, Counseling and Psychological Services. Please remember that although the podcast is intended to provide support is not a replacement for psychotherapy. If you are interested in counseling services, and are a Columbia University student on Morningside campus, please contact CPS at 212-854-2878.

Today's episode is on developing compassion in places where you don't see yourself. I am joined by one of my good friends Brencé Pernell [cheering and applause plays in the background]. [Worthy [softly]: Whooo hoo!] [Pernell [softly]: Yayyyy.] Brencé is currently the Assistant General Counsel at MDRC, a social policy firm aimed at improving public education in the lives of poor people. Brencé studied at Duke University and then went on to obtain his master's in education at Harvard. And after that, he worked for a few years and then went on to NYU School of Law. After law school, he clerked for two years and then went on to litigate at a law firm here in New York. So maybe we could just start off with sharing, like how we know each other. Do you want to share that story? Or should I?

Brencé Pernell (guest): Sure. Well, you know, I think it's pretty special. Because Keoshia and I actually go way back to elementary school, we were both...growing up...in small town Blackville, South Carolina. We were in the same classes in elementary school, up until about third or fourth grade until Keoshia left us [Worthy: Yes.] And went on to go do her own thing and carry out her own accomplished career. And so what was it, like, last year?

Worthy: Yep. Last year.

Pernell: Last year, we coincidentally found out that we lived just a few blocks from each other here in Harlem, New York all the way from Blackville, South Carolina, and rekindled a friendship. And it's been beautiful since. It's pretty special.

Worthy: It is really special.

Pernell: But you know, to your credit, and to your point about networking, I think we, we found out that we live close to each other based on LinkedIn.

Worthy: Yup. Yeah.

Pernell: And so you reached out and then I was really happy and excited to find out that you were here in Harlem.

Worthy: Yes, yes, small world, small world. But I, I felt like I had to start with someone who's from home. I wanted the first episode to be about compassion given the fact that 2020 has been a particularly hard year for my Black and Brown people. It wasn't the fact that it opened our eyes up, I think it opened the rest of the world's eyes up to, you know, the, the long-standing social disparities and injustices that Black and Brown people face. But I'm also thinking about not just that, but you know, COVID-19, and how Black and Brown communities are being diagnosed at a disproportionate higher rate, right. This is seen in higher rates of hospitalization, infections, and mortality rates. Again, I can speak for myself, I felt like living in a pandemic I had to just really sit with my feelings, sit with my thoughts, but also witness, you know, these, these killings, these murders on TV, and, you know, I'm not on social media. And I'm thankful for that. But sometimes it's hard to separate our identities and now put on the student hat, right, and trying to go back and, you know, perform well, while you're also dealing with your Blackness and how other people view you. So, compassion for me, I think, is a key ingredient, I think, for healing, for ourselves, and even for, you know, for certain students who are on these PWI campuses. So, Dr. Kristin Neff is someone who's done a lot of work in self-compassion, and she defines it as an attitude that is relevant to every personal experience of suffering. And that entails three interacting components: self-kindness versus self-judgment, a sense of common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. So she goes on and talks about these three

components, but I do want to bring it back to you Brence and ask you like, what does compassion or self-compassion mean to you and how do you show it in your work with your friends, with peers?

Pernell: Yeah, well, I think for for me, at its core, it's about our ability to, to see ourselves and others. And I think that that, that ability to see the commonality, I think, is important. Especially, I think across class lines, lines of race, other lines about identity, I think our in ability to do so is the source of so much of bigotry and hatred and oppression in the world. And so... And that's not to say, that's not to say it's easy, compassion, that is exercising compassion. But I do think it's important. And I think depending on the context, the responsibility to show or exercise compassion is, you know, stems from, like, a large historical context that's not to be ignored. And so when we think about traditionally, folks who've been in power, and folks who have not, I think that this obligation to find and demonstrate compassion shows up a little different.

Worthy: Mmm hmm. Have you had any challenges this year with being compassionate towards the oppressor, just, you know, I find myself and I've heard this from a few people to just like, you know, after everything that, you know, happened over the summer, people are like, you know, they're still killing us, right, and really struggling with being compassionate towards their, their white peers or friends. Did that ever come up for you?

Pernell: Well, so, I can answer this in a few different parts [both speakers laugh]. You know, the first thing I should acknowledge is that, so my mother is white. And, you know, for my life, my whole life, I've identified as a Black man with a white mother. And I think you could probably speak to this as well, for the short time that you spent in South Carolina, but also in the time that you spend in other parts of the South. I think growing up around poor white people is, is a very different kind of experience. And so there were many times in my life, where I, it was easier for me to connect with, and, or empathize with poor white people, given where I came from. More so than the, the white people, you know, I was regularly encountering at PWIs, and other professional spaces. And so, so I think that colors, pun intended sure [both speakers laugh], in some ways, and so I think, specifically, I think it's allowed for me to, I think, even if I am struggling, if I feel torn, if I feel angry, I think there is sort of still this underlying muscle of mine, if you will, to connect with and identify with some of the experiences of poor white people, even if just from a class perspective. And so, so, yeah, just I wanted to acknowledge that and I think that that, of course connects to my own racial background. And family members I have, but I will say, I think that I recognize that, you know, we can, we have so much energy, and the muscle to exercise compassion, I think can be exercised but so much. And as for me, I think I've aimed to focus my efforts more on having compassion for other people in the Black community, my family members and my friends. And that's not to say, you know, trying to find ways to extend compassion to folks who have traditionally been in power or white people or whoever that may be, depending on the struggle, but it's not energy that I necessarily have. [Worthy: Yeah.] It's not anything that I'm especially patient in doing and so I leave that exercise of compassion other folks. I think, for me, the focus has been more so on finding ways to show compassion to people who look like me.

Worthy: Now, I didn't get into all you've done in your career. Do you mind sharing with people just you know, I shared a little bit about your educational experience, but I think the students could benefit from knowing about like, you know, what do you do as a career? What did you do after you graduate?

Pernell: Sure. So. So Keoshia mentioned, I went to Duke, Duke was one of three schools I applied to...

Worthy: Just three?

Pernell: Just three. You know, I know people who look like me, and who came from Blackville, South Carolina to go to schools like Duke. And so I applied to two schools in South Carolina and Duke was Duke was my reach school. And I was really excited and thrilled to be able to go there. I struggled terribly my first academic semester, and then found my groove and soared from there. And it was great. And I had a wonderful Duke experience. But I knew, you know, speaking of compassion, that I wanted to have a career that was about service to others, just based on my own educational experience, in rural, Black, rural South Carolina. And so, you know, I thought that might look like teaching. I thought it might look like being a lawyer and doing advocacy work. And so, basically, I tried to do all of those things [both speakers laugh]. And so I went to graduate school afterwards, to get a master's in education and taught for three years after that, including a year in South Carolina, I went back home to South Carolina and taught in a context very similar to Blackville.

Worthy: Okay.

Pernell: And then went to law school to try to find a way to weave my interests in race, education and the law. And so I went to NYU. And then I clerked for federal judges for a few years thereafter. And then worked for a year at a big law firm here in New York, just to get some experience. And also just to bide my time until I can sort of find the work in the nonprofit, nonprofit or public sector space that that I that I really wanted and that came about through MDRC. So that's where I currently am and the beautiful part of it is that in the last year, I've gotten to, it's been a complete circle and I'm back in the in the classroom, teaching as an adjunct at a few law schools here, here in New York. And it's been great. I've been having a great time.

Worthy: Good, good. Wow, so much for a young man [laughs].

Pernell: Yeah. You know, we're not too young Keoshia [both speakers laugh].

Worthy: Yeah, young in spirit [laughs].

Pernell: There we go [laughs].

Worthy: I do want to ask, what was the biggest challenge? You mentioned the first semester at Duke?

Pernell: Oh, oh, boy. Um, you know, the big thing, you know, this is, and this is what I mean, on the class issue is that, I just felt like I...there was no one who knew where I came from. And it, it was just, you know, the Black students, many of whom I'm still friends with, for the most part, not all of them, for the most part, came from especially privileged backgrounds. You know, they were talking about, you know, their summer homes and their parents being doctors and lawyers. And, you know, my parents barely had a college education, you know, they got like an associate's degree. And so it was just a completely different experience and created some, I think, difficulties for me, in terms of me feeling like, I was smart enough to be there. Whether I belong there, whether I was wealthy enough to be there. You know, I, you would look at the student parking lot. And you know, I remember my red 91 Ford Explorer [Worthy laughs], that I've driven all through high school, and then after that, it's just like, lines of BMWs, that the other first-year students, these 17-18-year-olds, and I remember, my parents dropped me off, and they saw all of those cars and they shook their head, like we don't know what, what this is about to be for you. But hey, yeah, and I and I, I cried home, I was like, Mom, I think, you know, I'm just not smart enough to do this. I think I need to just go ahead and transfer to Clemson or USC, instead of embarrassing myself. Now, mind you, this was despite the fact that I had gotten a full scholarship to Duke, none of that mattered to me. I felt I still didn't feel like that was enough to demonstrate that I was smart enough to be there, that I belonged there. And, you know, I was just really psyching myself out and to my father's credit, you know, he told me you're going to stay right there [both speakers laugh]. [Worthy: That sounds like it, that sounds about right.] You're gonna stay right there and you're gonna stick it out. And, I mean, the other two smaller things is that I was also this is the first time in my life that I was challenged and that I had to accept the fact that I wasn't the best at everything.

Worthy: But you graduated valedictorian?

Pernell: I did, but you know, of a class of 53, you know [Worthy [jokingly]: "It doesn't matter."], [Pernell laughs] and so, you know, really small, but I was not used to being challenged. And, and I think this was the first time that I, my, my worldview was really being challenged and I think really, ultimately, really productive ways, which I now appreciate. That was one of the things, but the other thing that I think gave me problems was the fact that I was not being myself, I showed up at Duke, like, I think 90% of the first-year students wanting to be a doctor, even though I had no interest in being a doctor, I just thought that that's what success looked like, you know...

Worthy: I see that all the time.

Pernell: It's, right, I imagine you do. And so as soon as I realized that, that's this is not what you want to do, my experience completely changed. And in the process of that I did meet someone who was from Orangeburg, South Carolina, who I accidentally discovered and that also helped tremendously. One of the few who would also make it to Duke and from a very similar environment as mine, and I was just so...I felt so blessed to have been able to connect with her. My guard came down so much, my mother called her and thanked her and she's like he changed my son's career. [Worthy: Aww.] [both speakers laugh] And it was just because I needed a friend, honestly, who came from a background that was similar to mine.

Worthy: You know, I think what you're talking about with their first semester sounds like impostor syndrome, which I hear [Pernell: Absolutely!], you know, that's just I think it's common for especially Black people, but Black students, you know, when they are feeling challenged and feeling out of place, right, to second guess themselves, even though you had this scholarship, that proved that you deserve to be there, but you still second guessed yourself. Yeah, thank you for sharing that I, I do notice, because we are talking about compassion, that you are able to kind of bring it back to yourself and show compassion towards yourself. And I think your friend helped you with that. Like finding who you really are what you want to do. I always tell, like, you know, the students that I work with, like community is so important, and especially when you're feeling alone, it's nice to have someone. So, law school was a breeze?

Pernell: No, you know...

Worthy: Why law school? [Pernell laughs]. So, first of all, because I think a lot of, you know, just I'm trying to speak on behalf of the students that I've, you know, worked with or encountered in, or just people in general. A question that I get often was like, how did you know like this, like, how did I, how did you know that you wanted to get a PhD? Like I know, part of it is like you wanted to give service to give back. But how did you know that education, a master's in education wasn't enough that you had to go on to this other route?

Pernell: Yeah, okay. Yeah, I can answer that question first. I think it's a I think it's a good one and especially useful for, for students. I, I think I was taking it sort of one experience at a time. And at Duke, I felt especially passionate

about education. So I wasn't entirely sure what I'd do after that, but I knew before I did anything I wanted to teach. And so... So yeah, I also knew, however, that I wanted to be a good teacher. And so I felt like further academic preparation would be useful for that. But if we're being honest, I also recognize that there are certain names that carry weight in the, in the professional community. And so it became clear to me that Harvard was one of those names [both speakers laugh] as it related to graduate schools of education. And so I, and I was fortunate enough to win a fellowship to help pay for that. And so... So yeah, I was at Harvard and then I taught for several years. But you know, it was while I was at Harvard, that I realized that I think the kind of impact I wanted to have, it felt like a law degree was more conducive to that than another professional degree. I considered, you know, in it, like an Ed.D. or a PhD in education or sociology or something that would allow me to study educational systems. But I think I wanted more... I wanted a more immediate impact. I wanted to be able to file lawsuits [both speakers laugh], out of anger and frustration, to remedy what I thought were, you know, pretty severe injustices in our school systems. And so granted, I am not a litigator now, but that's what informed my initial desire to want to go to law school. And so, and to your earlier question, you know, law school was not a breeze [Worthy laughs]. So I get to NYU, and I, I'm there with a Duke degree with the Harvard degree, with teaching experience, and impostor syndrome is there just as strong as ever. [Worthy: Yup.] And I think what I've come to understand it, that it just doesn't go away, [Worthy: It does not.] it does not go away, I sit in front of my students... still feel it... You know? I'm, like, I don't, you know, they're gonna find me out [Worthy: Yup.], they know, I don't know what I'm talking about. And I think to, you know, I think to you, into the, to the first very first question, you know, what, what we want to discuss here is, as it relates to compassion, I mean, I think that's one of the been one of the big lessons for me, is that I've been disappointed in myself over time, sometimes, that I still wrestle with impostor syndrome, I felt like there's so much energy expended, that could be, you know, it just, it creates stress, I could be using it, you know, experience and feel joy and peace, peace of mind. But I don't, and I think, from the point of compassion is that, it's okay, if this never goes away. And that doesn't say anything about you, or work that you need to do. And that, in fact, most people experience this, it's not just, [Worthy: Yes.] you know, people of color. It's also, you know, that you spoke about women feel it, even a lot of, you know, your, your traditional straight white men feel it. And oftentimes, a lot of the, you know, the, a lot of the behavior you see exhibited on their part, is sort of overcompensation [Worthy: Yes, yes.] because they feel like, you know, and so this is one of the things that unite us, unites us as humans. We're all struggling with this. And I think that that helps me, it relieves the stress a lot. So like, we're all sort of struggling with wanting to belong and feeling like we don't belong or don't deserve to be where we are.

Worthy: Yeah, I think that also goes back to what you said, you were able to connect with the poor white people just based on like those circumstances, [Pernell: Mmm hmm.] and you could provide compassion towards them because you have the shared experience. But that also relates to this impostor syndrome, right? Like where, at least in my work as a therapist, I can be frank, you know, like, you know, it's yes, a huge part of the work is about relationships. And so I hear a lot of different things, but it's about finding, even if you can't connect with the person, right, it's about finding that one thing that you can empathize with them, right, like whether it's, you know, being lonely or being feeling really down feeling hopeless, or just having this impostor syndrome. Like that's something that we all share that we all struggle with. And I think like what you mentioned, is just being able to be kind to yourself and normalize it. [Pernell: Mmm hmm.] I think that's just the huge thing with impostor syndrome. Like everyone feels this. All people feel it, all genders all, you know, all races, we all struggle with it, but it's something I know, we're jumping into a new topic here, but I do think is relevant to just a trajectory of like, you know, your, your experience as a student. And it also does relate to my experience, because I remember, before we started, we were talking about like, oh, how can I say this? And you were like, see, see that? [both speakers laugh] You know, I was nervous and feeling like, you know, am I gonna be good enough for this? and stayed, you know, prepared all week, all yesterday. But you're right, like, I think we all at some point feel like impostors, [Pernell: Yeah.] I've learned to accept it and just kind of move on. But that's the way I show compassion towards myself just kind of validate. You know, it's coming up for me. But here's all these things that I've done. The end of the day, I still work at Columbia. And I'm like..

Pernell: That's it. [Keoshia Worthy: Yeah.] That's it. I mean, I thought that one of the best ways that I thought I read about sort of dealing with it is treating it as like a guest at a dinner table [Worthy: Oh, I like that.] And it's like, "Hi, impostor syndrome. I see you, you can have a seat. Now, you're not gonna dominate the conversation, but I recognize you're there. And I'm not gonna pretend like you aren't there." But there are other affirming and productive emotions, also at the table, and I'm going to focus my time and attention on that. And so, yeah, you know, we I've accepted that it's sitting at a lot of people's dinner tables. Yeah.

Worthy: I think it's probably sitting with us right now [both speakers laugh]. We see you impostor syndrome [both speakers laugh]. [Pernell: Right]. Okay, so my next question and I guess this is more related to racism-related stress,

and I think this ties in to being able to whether that be show compassion towards yourself or to other people, do you think is, well at first have you ever experienced any racism-related stress?

Pernell: I'm sure I have [laughs]. I'm sure I have. You know, the reason I answer it in that way is because I am a firm believer in the fact that we are probably all, all of society, I think, is experiencing some, some sort of stress related to racism, whether it be on the inflicting end or on the receiving end, you know, Brian Stephen, who was my professor in law school, and one of my professional crushes [both speakers laugh], you know he describes it as sort of like smog in the air that affects us all, whether we realize how, how it's affecting us or not, even if it's not entirely visible and so, so yeah, I think it affects all of us. Now, in terms of specific instances that I face, sure, I mean, I'm sure it's come about, I think that it's been interesting in my my career, in that I feel like we are of the generation where, you know, racism shows up and I think in a lot more subtle and sophisticated ways. And so I think one of the stressful parts about racism is that trying to convince ourselves that it was because of racism absent [Worthy: Yes, yes.] any knowledge that it was like explicit discrimination-

Worthy: I feel like snapping [referring to snapping fingers] right now [both speakers laugh].

Pernell: So you know, you want you are like winding yourself up wondering like, what was this related to race? And you know, you, you're feeling crazy... Because, again, no one said anything directly, or did anything directly... But yeah, I can, I can think of several instances, both more individual base and systemic that I thought was contributing to, you know, to ultimately maintaining a system of White supremacy. And so I'm sure we all can think of [Worthy: Yeah.] instances to that effect.

Worthy: What would be your advice for students who are experiencing this on campus or in classes, especially? Maybe they are noticing it through Zoom, right? Where people just kind of shut off their cameras when they speak or aren't giving them eye contact? Or just kind of, I guess, doing these more subtle gestures of just kind of looking away or being distracted? Or just what would be your advice for students?

Pernell: Well, you know, one of the things I think I wished, how do I frame it? One of the things I think, I wish I took more advantage of is what it meant to have Black professors.

Pernell: And I think, you know, coming from where we spoke about where I come from, in South Carolina, I did get to Duke, I thought professors were gods, I thought they were like, untouchable [laughs]. And so, I think that for that reason, I both, I both worked really hard to try and impress them but also was really intimidated by the idea of trying to get to know them on a more personal level. And and now granted, I you know, I only teach, teach as an adjunct, but I will say that on the other side of it, you know, leading a classroom at a university... professors are just, they're human [laughs]. They're human and I think Black professors, or Black teachers, or lecturers, or whatever, I think are oftentimes very sort of open and excited by the prospect of having these kinds of conversations with students and wanting to support them in this way. And so, now, we can also talk about how I think, you know, Black professors and teachers and university spaces oftentimes feel overwhelmed when they're one of the few at these institutions. [Worthy: I was just having this conversation with a colleague.] And all of the, you know, Black students or other students are reaching out to them for mentorship and or support. You know, I don't talk about sustainability issues. Sure. But ideally, you know, there would be enough Black teachers on university campuses who could help support students in that way. And I think the reason I think is it was especially when it did happen informally... I thought and it happened, I think much more I think later in my career. And then early on at Duke. I was just, it was just nice to have someone who was in a position of power, who recognized what I was going through. And even if they didn't ultimately have the solutions about what there was to be done, you felt affirmed in your experience. And I mean, I think going back to earlier, what you what you were saying, or what we were talking about is like, at least in the end, you didn't you knew you weren't crazy, you weren't making this up. And I think, you know, there can be a lot of stress, stress just related to that. And so, yeah, you know, in my, my, the latter stages of my career, it's been very affirming to hear from Black lawyers or Black professors who talk about the experiences they still face in these institutions, and so or the impostor syndrome they still have. And that's always been very affirming for me, because I situate that with the success that they've ultimately had and recognize that, okay, it happens, and I feel affirmed, affirmed in my feelings about this happening to me, but it doesn't necessarily dictate my success.

Worthy: Right. But it's something I don't know if you ever felt this way. But it's like, sometimes I want it to be over, right? Like I want it to, I don't want to feel Black or feel invisible as it goes back to like my title, right? You would think that I know, like, you know, talking to my mentor, and I'm like, do you still feel this way? Do you still have these struggles? And she's like, "Yes, I do." [Pernell: Mmm hmm, mmm hmm.] And I'm like this will never go away. You know. And I think that's the, especially for younger students. I think that's the the biggest challenge for them to accept. I think acceptance is key like that you will always, you know, have these feelings like impostor syndrome feelings, you will always and maybe I'm just speaking for myself, like I will always be seen as the Black woman in the room. Right. And because of especially that identity in itself, that brings on the feelings of impostor, right?

Pernell: Yeah.

Worthy: But I try, I guess, going back to compassion, which is what this is, this episode is about like I, in my own experiences I try to be thoughtful and what I say and how I communicate, even in this experience, when those you know, as we mentioned, the impostor syndrome is here as a guest sitting with us in Brence's example. So I always try to be careful and how, again, like how I communicate myself, but also making sure like I'm comfortable, and not being overly anxious as I was when I was like in graduate school. I think that was the first time I've had the experience that you shared with at Duke when I went to Seton Hall, because before then I was at HBCUs.

Pernell: Right.

Worthy: Winston-Salem State University, have to throw that in there. [Pernell: Okay [laughs]. But yeah, so those experiences your first semester, so you were like, 17/18, [Pernell: Mmm hmm.] I didn't have that experience until, like, 25. [Pernell: Wow.[] You know, so later on in life, definitely a culture shock. But, um, like those challenges, you know, it was it was a tough time for me.

Pernell: Yeah, yeah it is. It is really tough. And I think about students in today, and I have wondered about whether, whether what being mostly or all virtual, how that's affected that dynamic about being one of the few Black bodies in the room, because it's less... I thought about whether it's less tangible now whether because you are, you know, interacting so much over screen maybe from home around maybe around more people who look like you whether it be roommates or family members or whatever. Whether that's helped in some way, you know, mitigate against I think some of that stress and maybe not, but you know, that was that was one of the more stressful parts for me and I do feel a difference now. The organization I work for is predominantly white, and it does feel very different now. Not being in an office with surrounded by so many white bodies, in terms of feeling, you know, like I'm the one or you know, feelings about impostor syndrome coming about. I mean, it's definitely still there even in just emailing back and forth [Worthy: Of course.] You know it doesn't have to be physical. But I do wonder about how that's changing things?

Worthy: I think that's a good question. I feel like I do speak up more in certain meetings. And it may have something to do with like this comfort like, my dog can come in here while I'm talking. [Pernell laughs: Right!] I have this curveball for you. [Pernell: Oh, okay.][All right. I call this segment "Flash from the Past." [sounds of harp playing] Alright, so I am going to read several prompts to you. The first one is like this or that, right? And then you choose. And so it's called "Flash from the Past" because I want you to think about, like, how you were as a student. [Pernell: Okay.] Then the second prompt is, I'm going to start a sentence and you're going to finish it. [Pernell: Okay.] All right. So this is you know, all about your the first part, again, is all about, you know, whether you this or that, you know, as a student and then the other is what would you tell yourself? [Pernell: Okay.] Okay, are we ready? [Pernell: Yes.] So I have this fun music to [graduation music plays in background for the duration of this segment] [Worthy laughs]

Pernell: Let's do it. Oh, I'm going to cry [referring to the music he hears].

Worthy: Aw, don't cry Brence [said softly]. Exams or essays?

Pernell: Essays

Worthy: Individual or group projects?

Pernell: Individual.

Worthy: Study ahead or cram?

Pernell: Study ahead.

Worthy: Oh, look at you [Pernell laughs]. Did I study? This is about you. I'm sorry. Snapchat or Instagram?

Pernell: Instagram.

Worthy: Books or movies?

Pernell: Books.

Worthy: Night owl or early bird?

Pernell: Early bird.

Worthy: Follower or leader?

Pernell: Fleader? [both laugh]

Worthy: Fleader...[both laugh] I like that, I like that. On time or late?

Pernell: On time.

Worthy: Front or back of class?

Pernell: Back.

Worthy: Did you go out on Friday night or did you stay in?

Pernell: Stayed in.

Worthy: Aww. So this is, I was trying to think about our when we were in school who were popular and so I couldn't really I don't know what kind of music you listen to. But here's something that comes up. Usher or Chris Brown?

Pernell: What did you say?

Worthy: Usher or Chris Brown?

Pernell: Oh, Chris Brown.

Worthy: Okay, okay. Texting or talking?

Pernell: This is now or as a student?

Worthy: As a student.

Pernell: Oooh talking [laughs].

Worthy: Okay. You're a texter now?

Pernell: All the way [both laugh].

Worthy: All right. So what would you tell your younger self, if you were in school still, whether it be graduate or undergrad. Never forget to...

Pernell: Devote at least one weekend day to work.

Worthy: Be open to...

Pernell: Meeting people who come from different backgrounds.

Worthy: And don't be afraid to...

Pernell: Seek out mentorship and support from professors.

Worthy: Awesome. That was so perfect, we finished, we timed it [referring to graduation music] with the music [laughter from both].

Pernell: Also I'm revising it's definitely Usher, not Chris Brown.

Worthy: Why did you go back?

Pernell: Because I realized I know so many more Usher songs, than I do Chris Brown songs. [Worthy: Yeah.] Especially back back then.

Worthy: I used to have like a little mini crush on Chris Brown.

Pernell: I've heard about it [both laugh].

Worthy: I've shared that with you before?

Pernell: You have.

Worthy: Oh ok, oh man...

Worthy: All right. So let's just, you know, do you have any tips for students, on, you know, students who may be struggling with self-compassion or, or and/or compassion towards other people? Like, what would be your advice?

Pernell: Well, I think that, um, you know, I think it connects back to several of the things we've already discussed. I think one of the most important lessons I learned was that everyone, everyone is struggling with acceptance. And I think that that is manifesting in different ways. And that in some ways, we're sort of all coping in that way. And so you know, you, you know, you think about the person who arrives with a very macho personality. I think that's a form of coping or overcompensating, you think about the person who's really quiet in the corner of the classroom. That's a form of coping. And so I think the commonality is that we're all coping just in different ways. And I think that how we cope is just informed by our past experiences and traumas. And so I find that very, to be of great relief, because I think for awhile, I believed that some people just had life figured out, and that they were just very confident and knew their way about the world. And one can still be confident, I think, and still be coping. [Worthy: Yes, of course.] And so I would say that I think the second thing is just to... one of the, there's a psychologist at Stanford, Carol Dweck, whose work I think in the education field, really, I think revolutionized my way of thinking about learning and teaching. And she introduced these terms of having a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. And she talks about how, her research speaks to how what oftentimes account, what can oftentimes account for the success of students is that those students who are successful tend to view obstacles, or frame obstacles or challenges as something that can be ultimately be mastered. And it's not about having an innate ability, which is what a lot of the fixed, fixed intelligence mindset students tend to think, that I'm just not good at math, or I'm just not good at science, or I'm just not good at sports. But from a growth mindset perspective, it's just like, I'm not good at it now. But with enough practice, with with enough diligence and hard work, even if I'm not the best at it, I can get better at it. And I think that approaching problems, approaching intellectual tasks, trying to exercise that muscle more is like, I'm not good at it now, but I could be if I wanted it to be, it's just about enough discipline, practice, and hard work to get there. I think that that's important for for students to try to tap into more, and that is not about, you know, just having natural abilities, necessarily that that lend themselves to being able to accomplish certain tasks or do certain things.

Worthy: Thanks. You know, I'm going to share a few of my tips. The first one is to provide grace. I think maybe this is just from my spiritual identity. I think sometimes we can be too hard on ourselves [Pernell: Yeah.] and I think that we all can benefit from being more kind to ourselves; giving ourselves more grace. The other thing is, just being more mindful. That doesn't mean that we have to meditate. It's just, you know, being more aware of our thoughts, you know, using our observing mind, and taking, creating some distance from our thoughts. I think, at least in my experiences I don't know if Brenne, if you can relate, but sometimes when those like negative thoughts come I can latch onto them, [Pernell: Mmm hmm.] I can spiral, instead of creating some distance. And saying, hmm, I wonder why my mind is going in this direction? And I wonder what these thoughts mean about me, about the situation? Being more curious, like having more perspective. And I think if we could do that, we can start to not only have, show compassion towards ourselves, but to other people. And the last thing, is, you know, being patient, right? You know, many times people come to therapy and I always joke, it's like I don't have a magic wand for you to get better after this session. You know, change takes time, I think we're going to face obstacles at various like at different stages in our lives sometimes throughout the same year, but just be patient to yourself. And, you know, just going back to being gracious or providing grace towards yourself. I think it... a lot of times we don't treat ourselves as good as we treat other people [Pernell: Mmm hmm.] [outro music begins to play] And so just turning that inwards would be my tip for being more compassionate. Did you have any last thoughts Brenne?

Pernell: No, I thought that was beautiful.

Worthy: Aw, you're so sweet.

Pernell: I'm going to apply those tips myself.

Worthy: Aww [both laugh]. Well thank you for coming, I'm so happy to have you here. I share this with my mom all the time, my mom asks about you all the time by the way. [Pernell: Aww.] She's like have you seen Brenne? I'm like, yes [both laugh]. And shout out to my mom because she is the reason why we connected. She sent me a picture of us when we were like in first grade [Pernell laughs].

Pernell: Thank you Keoshia, it's been a pleasure.

Worthy: Alright.

Worthy: Thank you so much for offering up your time and spending it with me. If you are a Columbia University student on Morningside campus and today's episode left you feeling like you could benefit from talking more about this topic with an expert, please do not hesitate to call CPS at 212-854-2878. [outro music ends]

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>