

## STAY Tuned Ep. 25 With Micah Webster- Transcript

**Mei:** [00:00:00] Welcome back to Stay Tuned, supporting Transition Aged Youth. This podcast is brought to you by the Transitions to Adulthood Center for Research at UMass Chan Medical School Department of Psychiatry, and in partnership with our research sponsor, the National Institute for Disability Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research.

I'm your co-host Mei,

**Gillian:** and I'm your other co-host, Gillian.

**Mei:** And today we have a special guest. His name is Micah Webster. I don't know if you wanna go ahead and introduce yourself, Micah.

**Micah:** Thanks Mei. Uh, yeah, so I'm Micah Webster.

I use he, him pronouns. Um, I'm born and raised in Massachusetts and I'm a behavioral health services researcher with lived experience of mental health disorders. I also co-lead the statewide Young Adult Advisory Council for the Department of Mental Health.

**Mei:** Today Micah is here to talk about navigating his own mental health conditions in relation to, uh, navigating his religious and spiritual identities and communities as a form of community participation. So, super excited to hear more about your story and, uh, your thoughts in terms of spirituality and how that can relate to community participation outcomes.

**Micah:** Thank you. Excited to share.

**Gillian:** Yeah. so Micah, can you give us a bit in your own words, your personal experience with mental health, mental illness.

**Micah:** Yeah. So growing up I was really close to my one sibling. And in our teenage years he started developing symptoms of a serious mental illness, and that

was really hard for [00:02:00] him as well as our whole family. Many years of struggling there to figure out what was going on and how to respond appropriately.

We're still figuring it out a dozen years later. Um, but as part of that I developed my own mental illness. I, I developed an anxiety disorder where almost to compensate for the amount that my brother was struggling. I tried to be perfect at everything and have no problems. And it was a long time before I started acknowledging how much I was struggling especially in comparison to my sibling and how our experiences differed.

I recognized how important my own mental health was and started, um, started looking for help first with some trusted adults and then. A few starts and stops with therapy until I eventually found a counselor that really started helping me out and, uh, started my [00:03:00] journey with cognitive behavioral therapy.

And I've been going since then. Ironically, I wound up in the behavioral health services, uh, research field even before I started professional mental health care for myself. So it's all starting to come together.

**Mei:** Yeah. I thank you so much for sharing that. And I'm curious, do you think it was your career that inspired you to look inwards and think about, maybe I could really benefit from reaching out for help, or do you think it was unrelated?

**Micah:** Yeah, great question. Yeah, it really was strongly related to my career. Uh. I'll say for years my parents and my brother encouraged me to go seek help. And I think maybe the first time I tried was late in high school, like a one-off conversation with a counselor where I was like, ah, this isn't working.

And I did a couple more of those over the years. But it was [00:04:00] only once I was living on my own. Um. Working that I felt I could make that decision for myself, especially while I was under the stresses of trying to take care of myself and doing a job and, uh, I think an important question I asked myself was like, okay, I'm out here saying let's remove the stigma of mental health.

Yet here I am saying, oh, no, no, no. That's, that's not a problem I have. That's not for me. So I kind of ask myself that honest, critical question and, um, let myself be

open to exploring the possibility of what mental health treatment could mean for me.

**Gillian:** Yeah. And young adulthood is, those years are so formative and you're out on your own with all these new responsibilities, and it's a lot at once, especially when you might've already had other stuff going on. So that makes sense. Yeah.  
[00:05:00]

**Micah:** Yeah.

**Gillian:** And it's great that you got help.

**Micah:** Great. Thank you.

**Mei:** Totally. Yes. I, I mean, I feel like I'm living that now.

I've only really just started the whole living on my own process and figuring out how to balance work while balancing my personal life and like keeping up with housework and chores and it all, it's a lot to manage mental health condition or not, you know, and, and so that's really great that you were able to.

Sort of question, your own response of like, why, why do I think that this doesn't apply to me?

**Gillian:** In previous conversations, uh, we've discussed your spiritual journey

**Micah:** Yeah.

**Gillian:** And how that's also played a role in your life. Can you tell us more about that?

**Micah:** Yeah, I'd be really happy to. So I wanna be clear the position that I'm coming from because there are so many different spiritual experiences in the world and I think depending [00:06:00] on what someone believes in the community in which they were raised up to believe in that, that can really differently impact how spirituality fits into their mental health. So for me I was raised in a Protestant

Christian Church, uh, and I still identify as Christian. But I've worshiped at several different churches over the years and made different changes in my theology or what I believe about God. Um, the one thing that's always been core for me though, is love.

Uh, there's this great line from the Bible that I really try to live into that says. Whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in them. Everything I believe in and aspire to do comes first from that love.

**Mei:** That is a really beautiful line as someone really unfamiliar with the Bible. It's really, it is really interesting to hear some of the actual verbiage that the Bible states. I understand why you live your life by that [00:07:00] line because it, it is so powerful . and yeah, so I imagine some of your, like you alluded to, your theology is pretty specific. While other parts can be applied more generally to our audience today of all backgrounds and beliefs, so definitely really excited to hear about how some of your spiritual beliefs could be more generally applied to everyone listening today. Mm-hmm. Um, and so I'm wondering how has your spiritual life and spiritual journey affected or fed into your own mental health or vice versa?

**Micah:** Yeah, thanks for asking that. I think the two have been really linked my spiritual life and my mental and emotional health.

A big part of it has been through hope. I have this long range hope so, no matter how dark a day or season in my life got or in this time with the current environment in our country, how much is going on [00:08:00] around us that doesn't really seem to reflect my own morality and how I understand the world.

Still, I know that God will make it all okay in the end. I believe that in the end, love wins, and that gets me through depression in dismal times. At the same time, it's, it's not just a, a passive piece of knowledge that we have. It's important to pair what we believe in with action. So when it comes to hope, I have to remind myself what I hope in what I believe in, and what values to me are always important.

No matter how much the, um, actions of the world might be challenging, some of that another piece is that I've never really been alone. I. In the social connection research world, there's this term for existential loneliness. This feeling of being

alone in the universe or that no one else has had the same experience as me. That [00:09:00] hasn't really been a problem for me, my spiritual life.

And I think many people who have spiritual experiences we feel God's presence or the presence of a higher power and have someone to talk to. Another really important piece is this feeling of purpose and meaning. I think all of us crave a meaningful life and the feeling that we matter we're important to me.

Having a set of values which are spiritually grounded, but for anybody's life experience that that core set of values that they, um, center their life on. That's what gives us purpose and meaning. Some of the ways that I think about it are that I matter because God loves me. I have a purpose and God has a plan for me that makes what I choose to do significant and interesting for me, and it's also not something that I can mess [00:10:00] up.

I think so often when we're thinking about our values, there's this flip side. Where we can start to judge ourselves, especially for folks like me who deal with anxiety we can start to think, oh, am I good enough? Am I doing enough good? But when we ground ourselves in a value and don't get cut up so much in actions or results based thinking.

We just live out of that value, that can be really freeing. So acceptance and commitment therapy teaches that. And I think that's been a really cool parallel between say a standard and even secular teaching and methodology for treating mental illness. And my spiritual experience.

**Mei:** I was literally thinking about acceptance and commitment therapy as you were talking about living a life grounded in values. 'cause [00:11:00] I personally have, uh, been through acceptance and commitment therapy. It was truthfully such a game changer for me and my, uh, mental health journey. So I, I fully understand how important it can be for someone to identify the type of life they wanna live and how they can move towards living that kind of life. And it's not necessarily about whether you get to an end goal or not of like, I want to, uh, have this huge friend group, could be one goal that someone has, but it's about taking those.

Steps towards like meeting new people and putting yourself out there despite what your mental health condition might be telling you that it's unsafe and it feels scary. Moving beyond those anxieties and, and yeah, living out a values-based life like you were saying. So I fully understand the connection there.

**Micah:** I think another really great [00:12:00] piece, of experience can be accessing different perspectives on the world. I think oftentimes when I think about like the prevailing perspective or logic of the world, it's that it's, it's pretty superficial and straightforward and rational, but really in the human experience where it's so often irrational that sometimes it can be helpful to access other ways of thinking. So for me, maybe a favorite verse from the Bible is this, where God says to, to us, my grace is sufficient for you uh, my power is made perfect in weakness. And then the response from us is for when I'm weak, then I am strong.

And for me that means when I'm acknowledging my weaknesses or limitations in this world, especially in the light of external factors, like with your [00:13:00] example, Mei, if our value is to be really connected to a large community of friends, but for whatever reason other people aren't responding to us the way that we want them to maybe we have that limitation or that weakness that might be contributing to that.

It's, it's all right to accept our limitations and then tap into that value and that sort of spiritual side of things that so much transcends our immediate surroundings to access that strength of a, a love that cannot be surpassed, a piece that passes understanding of joy. I think. When we're confronted by the disappointments of the world, it can be really, really comforting to remember that there's more than just what we're seeing right in front of us.

**Gillian:** So does your faith, do you feel like that's something that requires ongoing work? [00:14:00]

**Micah:** Hmm. Yeah. Good question. I think so I've seen a lot of people approach their spiritual lives differently. For me, actively doing something every day to connect with what I believe in that helps keep it alive and meaningful for me and impactful.

So I don't know. I don't know what would be required in order to get a certain result, but I would say for me, just the act of engaging with my spiritual beliefs helps it be more present for me, helps remind me of that comfort or that perspective that takes me outside of maybe this narrow distorted focus that maybe my anxiety would want me to be in this small box and sort of sets me free to be existing outside and [00:15:00] beyond that I think there are a lot of different ways that work for different people of how to practice, uh, participating in their faith, sometimes prayer or something that looks like prayer, just sort of a.

Almost like, I almost think of it like talking to an imaginary friend can be really healthy just to sort of process. Sometimes it can be reflecting in groups whether that's like a book study or conversation circle. Music is often a really big part of people's spiritual lives. And can really tap into the emotional side of spirituality.

Yeah, more reading on your own. I think acts of service are also another really important way of connecting with spirituality and feeling like your values matter, that you have integrity, that you're actually living that out. Um, I think those are all good options to [00:16:00] consider.

**Mei:** I, I mean, I, I've never really thought about it that way as using like artistic expression as well as acts of service and many other. Many other things that people do in their day-to-day lives as a means to connect with yourself spiritually as well. That's a really, yeah, really interesting thought. 'cause obviously I've heard of like biblical music and whatnot, but I would love to hear more about, I don't know if, if music is a way you connect spiritually, but I would love to hear more about that process for you.

**Micah:** Music specifically?

**Mei:** Yeah. Yeah. 'cause I, I'm a huge fan of music. Uh, it's such a important part of my life. I play quite a few instruments as well. So I'm just curious for you how, how you've experienced that that part of connection with, with your spiritual self. Mm-hmm.

**Micah:** Well, this is, hmm. I'm sure there are lots of [00:17:00] experts on spiritual music because the traditions are thousands and thousands of years old, so there's so

much richness there. Um, I would say just in my experience let's see, so singing and participating in music in Christian churches is a really ancient tradition that goes. Beyond Christianity and is drawn from Judaism especially singing the Psalms, which is a, a book in the Bible that has a bunch of different, basically prayers that originally were set to music.

We've lost all of that music, and if you read them in English now, none of the rhymes or structure will actually sound like a song, but I promise that's how they originally were. So there's an ancient tradition there of just interacting through God or to God through. Song or poetry. So in churches there are different kinds of music.

Some are just really excited, worshipful, praise music of like, wow, God is really awesome. [00:18:00] Like this love and grace and mercy that we aspire to. That's really a fantastic good thing. And so that's sometimes like almost like a hype song. So that can be fun. Especially, you know, if I'm alone and just like in the car driving back from a pretty discouraging day of learning what's going on in the world sometimes that can help lift me up.

But then there are also songs more like chants. I think when I was young I heard a lot more of those kinds of songs. I thought like, oh, Christian music is terrible. They only have like two verses. But as I've gotten older, sometimes it's really important almost to meditate on an idea. I think that's what some of those more repetitive chant like songs are for.

But, and then connecting with what you were saying may of creating music. Yeah. I think that's just a way of expressing how we feel and what we think. I think a really useful metaphor for it. The spiritual life is that the higher power God really wants a [00:19:00] relationship with us, an intimate relationship.

And so we can think about what is, what does an intimate relationship look like in the Bible? Very often there's this metaphor of marriage. And the idea is that you take this metaphor of like, God being married to us, what do you hope married people do? They talk to each other. They share how they feel.



They spend time with each other they delight in each other. I think music can be a way of participating in that kind of intimacy, in relationship with God.

**Mei:** Super interesting. Very, very cool. And I, I think that's a really great point about what you were saying earlier about like the two verse songs or, um, even the hymns as feeling like more meditative.

**Micah:** It's

**Mei:** really cool point. Gillian, I don't know if you have anything to add, as well.

**Gillian:** I just wanna piggyback on what you were saying, Mei. It's interesting because I [00:20:00] would attempt to meditate or do mindfulness as a teenager. It did not work out. I don't know. It just was not for me at that time of my life.

But now as an adult, meditation is so helpful for so many things. And it's interesting where you're saying as a kid it was like, why are they just doing this over and over and now? Exactly. So

**Micah:** yeah, I think that's a great tieback to this idea that we develop spiritually over our lives and so changes are really natural.

Whether that's I don't know, questioning some of the things that we've been taught before or even just appreciating something that we had learned of a long time ago, but then actually finding it a good fit now even though it might not have been previously. I think a big theme in the spiritual journey is noticing.

Noticing how we feel and [00:21:00] some of the assumptions that we hold, being curious about that. And then having that courage hopefully in a safe space to start exploring start exploring some of the questions that we have. I think that's really pretty core to the heart of the spiritual journey.

**Gillian:** Yeah. Does your community feel welcoming and embracing of people with mental health conditions? Do you think?

**Micah:** Yeah. It does and I'm glad that you asked about community. I think a lot of what we've been talking about so far has been about our personal religious journeys and sort of what we believe in our relationship with God.

So I think of that as spirituality, the term religion I think of as how we humans live out our spirituality typically in community. Um. I think that it's really hard to be spiritual [00:22:00] without having a community. Fortunately, um, the church that I worship in and volunteer at does feel really welcoming of people with a lot of different life experiences.

And part of how they are welcoming is through being flexible. Really just good basic universal design. Giving people space to move around without distracting others. Encouraging an attitude of openness. Even beyond mental health experiences, a really common experience in churches, like a baby is crying or like a toddler is asking a question of their mom really, really loud, like.

These are normal things. Uh, we don't have to, I be all perfect and like not embodied. Um, like, oh, I never sneeze because I'm a spiritual being. That's ridiculous. We're, we're all here and we're all embodied in the same way. Um, and some people have their own, uh, neurodiversity. Some people [00:23:00] might need to pace or duck out halfway through the service or a small group activity.

I think it's really important that we all be ready to extend grace to each other and to be flexible.

**Gillian:** I love that. I love how it sounds like an inclusive environment right there, and it's really great to hear.

**Micah:** Yeah. Yeah. I think for a lot of us that have experienced not being included, being excluded or oppressed, even, especially from church, there's this. This term “church hurt” that a lot of us have had.

I also recognize a lot of the harm that spiritual communities have perpetrated. I think that's really important to own up to. To different oppressed and marginalized people, groups and identities.

I mean particularly particularly homosexual or other queer identities. Slavery is a really ugly [00:24:00] tradition of, in like forcing Christianity on folks a lot of colonialism. I think it's really important to recognize that. So I don't- I don't wanna judge people for being cautious when engaging with spiritual communities, maybe especially communities that have had some hegemonic power, like Christianity.

So I wanna be humble with that. But I also wanna say that, um, to borrow from a New York Times article recently, it's important that we don't throw the baby out with the baptismal water. I think that there's still something really valuable to be found in a spiritual community, so I hope people can push past the prejudice.

It's important to remember that that's not everyone and that's not every community.  
[00:25:00]

**Mei:** Yeah. And along those same lines of ways to make, religion more accessible and welcoming of all people. Are there any other recommendations you have that religious communities could implement to be more welcoming and accommodating of people of, you know, potentially different disabilities, mental health conditions?

Like you said earlier different neuro divergences. Ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures. That's a lot. But any initial thoughts?

**Micah:** Yeah. I think the point that I made earlier about sort of a universal design applies to a lot of different abilities that people may have or disabilities. But when we're getting into some of these experiences like culture, ethnicity, politics, even different spiritual beliefs- that's another area that I think religious and spiritual communities have a lot to learn, but also have a lot of potential to give back to the [00:26:00] community. So the tip that I would have is to go for unity, not uniformity. I'm borrowing that from my church.

But when I think of a community that emphasizes unity over uniformity I'm thinking of solidarity, living life together and accepting one another without enforcing everyone to have the same belief or dress the same way, or pray the same way with the same hand gestures or like the same kind of music.

It's allowing others to ask honest questions and come to different conclusions. I think a part of this solidarity that underpins genuine unity is also being committed to one another's wellbeing and growth in our church community, which comes from the Pietist tradition. If you wanna get a little [00:27:00] historical about it.

There's this tradition where people are allowed to ask questions and encouraged to ask questions, and then those around them say, okay, what's your evidence for that? Let, help me understand where is that written. So there's sort of an anchor. It's not just being all over the map, but it's almost like, um, strengthening each other's search.

And I think that process is what unity means, not just difference in the same building, but actually being a meaningful community together.

**Gillian:** So. Based on that, I am also wondering, do you have any thoughts or words of wisdom for those who don't have experience in the spiritual community or any spiritual experience whatsoever?

**Micah:** I do. I'm really fortunate that my fiancé [00:28:00] has been a real, a great example in my life of what those first steps in a spiritual journey could look like.

So I grew up in church, but she didn't really have any spiritual background of going to an organized, religious community. And so it was only in the last few years that she started, and so I'm gonna draw a lot from her experience. So I think a great first step in someone's spiritual journey is to find another trusted person to start asking questions with, considering different possibilities, maybe even exploring, going to different religious communities doesn't necessarily have to be a church on a Sunday morning.

It could be, uh, some other activity that feels more comfortable accessible for you. But yeah, finding that trusted person to, to journey alongside I think is really, really important. I think another great [00:29:00] spiritual wisdom from Ted Lasso is to be curious, not judgmental, and listen to where it seems like God or higher power is inviting you.

What do you genuinely want from the deepest part of you? Listen to that. Still small voice. And trusted enough to start asking questions, take some steps towards where those questions might be inviting you. The journey is not necessarily going to be simple or fast or linear. I think if anything, spirituality is going to defy all of our expect expectations and hopefully be a whole lot better than we could possibly imagine.

So yeah, those would be my pieces of advice. Find a trusted person, be curious and listen to what you want, what that invitation inside [00:30:00] you is, and start following that.

**Gillian:** I love that. If someone doesn't have, I. Someone in their life that could kind of has that experience to be that trusted person. Is there somewhere else that they can find someone to talk to about it and kind of get that same feedback?

**Micah:** That's an interesting question.

I think when looking for a trusted person, I wanna say. It's great if that person has a spiritual background, but it's not mandatory or necessary if you have a friend, if you have a family member maybe a mentor who's just someone that you trust to receive you and your questions, I think [00:31:00] that can be a good place to start.

I also think that. Since we're talking about spirituality, pretty honestly I don't think we're on our own, even if there's no one else around. I think if we open ourselves up to what I would call God, maybe some others might call higher power or even other words, I think that amazing things can happen.

So. If there's a person with spiritual experience around you that you trust, great. Think about talking to that. If there's just someone around you that you can really trust completely to be yourself, great. If there's no one around you, and you really are alone at this time, first time, I'm sorry that's real and that's hard, but I wanna encourage you that I don't think you're alone.[00:32:00]

I think someone out there cares for you.

**Mei:** Yeah. Thank you for pointing that out. It's really beautiful to think about actually. I am also curious, I recognize where we need to wrap up here, but, my brain always takes things very literally. I'm the type to need like very concrete instructions I guess. So I am, I'm curious about when you say exploring the questions you ask yourself or the questions that come up for you.

What does that exploration actually look like in practice? Is it journaling? Is it speaking to someone like, like you had recommended earlier? Like what are the various ways that we can go about exploring those questions that come up?

**Micah:** Good question. Yeah, I think everything that you said is a great option [00:33:00] and it really depends on what feels applicable to the person's questions? Yeah, I think, I think it's, it's hard to make a universal prescription of what to do. Uh, I hesitate to do that because everybody is so unique. I think exploring questions might involve, I hesitate to say Googling it, but you can try. There's a lot out there. I wouldn't necessarily universally endorse things, but it could be an interesting way of expanding your awareness of the options. If you are Googling some spiritual questions, please remember not everybody who claims to believe something believes the same thing as everybody else who claims the same label.

I think,

yeah, it's difficult. I. Journaling, I think, and just sort of reflecting on what feels meaningful as you go [00:34:00] through the process of asking these questions or talking to people who might be knowledgeable about that topic area, I think that's gonna be important. There's this idea in Christianity and maybe in other religions of God acting as this counselor or an advocate almost.

You can even think of it maybe as like your conscience or the back of your mind pointing you in the right direction and saying like, yeah, that's, that's the way that's, you're onto something there. And I think as we explore the answers to what our questions might be, it's important to listen to that still small voice that says like, this is probably it or it doesn't feel quite right.

And I think as we grow in our spiritual development, at least me thinking of my own journey, I've also started learning how to distinguish between sort of a healthy

prompting and what I might think of as like an [00:35:00] unhealthy temptation. A lot of the times it helps me to think of my anxiety and my thoughts that are deeply informed by anxiety as a temptation like.

Hmm. Should you go network with this person for that thing that you really care about in your career? Oh, no. They might judge you. Like you should probably, probably just stay on your own. That feels like a temptation to me. So I think as we're listening to the voice of our, our conscience we can also try and be critical thinkers about it.

**Mei:** I really like that answer. Thank you so much. I know I had put you on the spot there and, and there definitely is not a one size fits all to the question I asked, but I appreciate the answer a bunch.

**Gillian:** I love that too. Um, I think if you haven't been or had any experience before, whether church or any type of spirituality, different place of worship can be [00:36:00] intimidating and you don't know where to start. Mm-hmm. And of course there's, really depends on the person, um, and the situation. But I think what you said is so helpful and it's been really, really great talking to you.

Like Mei has said, enlightening. Um, just really a pleasure.

**Micah:** Thank you. Mine as well.

**Mei:** Yes. Well, um, it was so great to have you on just echoing everything Jillian just said. Super, super fascinating conversation today. I really appreciate you opening up and being vulnerable, sharing your own spiritual journey with us.

It's not something that I think people get to hear often. 'Cause it, it is such a personal thing. So really appreciate you coming on being such a great sport and, uh, having these really meaningful conversations today.

**Micah:** Thank you. I appreciate you making a generous space for me to share. I hope this conversation is meaningful to whoever's [00:37:00] listening and yeah.

I hope that also even if wherever folks are in their spiritual journey, just seeing another person who's made it to their late twenties and is still living life with a mental illness, I hope that's an encouragement too.

**Mei:** Thank you, Micah.

**Gillian:** If you would like to contact us, you can email us at [staytuned@umass.edu](mailto:staytuned@umass.edu) and check out the Transitions ACR website at [UMassmed.edu/transitionsacr](http://UMassmed.edu/transitionsacr), thanks for being here, and be sure to stay tuned for next time.

[00:38:00]