Podcast Introduction and Guest Welcome

I think health psychology will continue to bridge the gap between psychologists, mental health professionals, and medical providers like yourselves. I think there is so much research that shows that medical providers and mental health professionals should be working in the same facilities in the same context because we see the physical and mental shift back and forth.

And what would it look like to see a medical provider and then right after that you see your psychologist? And they can give you a plan, not just for your medical health, but also your mental health as well.

Welcome to the To Curious MD podcast. I'm Dr. Ali Ahmed. And I'm Dr. Surya Ravan. With the wisdom from holistic, alternative, and these conventional medicines, we are here to challenge the status quo.

We're curious about the connectivity and complexity between diverse fields of knowledge as a relief to consciousness, chronic illness, mental health, resilience, and beyond.

learning more about the art and science of healing, or listening to stories of extraordinary healing. You're in the right place. Let's dive in. Welcome to the Two Curious MD, where medicine is more than science.

It's art, connection, and integration. So today, we're going to be interviewing Phil Sarpong, and Simi is going to introduce him some more. Great. Welcome, Philip.

Did you go by Phil or Philip? You can call me Phil. That's fine. Okay. So Phil was born in Accra, Ghana. and moved to the United States with your family at a young age.

Phil's Background and Path to Psychology

You earned your undergraduate degree in neuroscience from Indiana University and a master's in health sciences from Boston University. Your career has always reflected a deep passion for both physical and mental health.

Having worked as a clinical informatics specialist and as a certified personal trainer through American Council on Exercise, you then went on to earn your doctorate in clinical psychology.

where you're an academic coach and a mentor, and you support others' journeys through going through the process of growth and well-being. And I love how you've grounded it in your experiences, as well as in the mind, body, and the spirit.

And I feel like this is a perfect example of how we find each other in this world, because we love to talk about all those things. on the Two Curious MDs podcast.

And so with that, welcome, Phil. I'd like to ask you a question about just your work. First of all, we'll share all your links, but you are on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

Right. Phil's guide to PsyD. That's right. So let's just dive right in. Can you explain what walk and talk therapy is and how you found that it benefits your time?

Yeah. Yeah. And thank you both for having me. I really appreciate just this opportunity. I know for me, I did not have a linear path towards clinical psychology.

I actually wanted to be a dentist. And so I was in dental school for about a year and a half. I know very, very different fields, but I really was passionate about just interpersonal care.

Talking with people, learning about people's stories, and so that's when I navigated and I shifted towards clinical psychology. And even in clinical psychology, I feel like I've had a medicine outlook, like I've been really passionate about the human body, the sciences.

And so I wanted to really interweave the medical and physical with the mental. And I think one of the passions have led into walk and talk therapy and doing things for like yoga based therapy for PTSD, just including the body, you know, somatic work.

And I think what is really amazing about walk and talk therapy, there's so much research behind it. When people walk, there's something that happens to the mind in that we naturally become more inquisitive, curious, creative, and it has all of the benefits of exercise, right?

So there's serotonin release, dopamine release, we're exercising, our heart rate's going up, we're burning all of these calories and endorphins.

What Walk-and-Talk Therapy Is

And so what a beautiful blend of being passionate about your physical health, but also being able to talk creatively about things that are going on as relates to anxiety, depression, or PTSD.

And so I have found it to be incredibly just useful and efficient. And when the weather is warm out here in Chicago, people love to walk. And so I just feel like it's another modality.

It's not the modality. It's not, you know, I wouldn't say it should be the thing that people should do, but I think it's one tool that I think we as clinicians can use in our toolbox for our patients and our clients.

So tell us a little bit of how this works. I know as a therapist, there's always this, and even licensing and how one has to be under a facility and under, that's one question.

The other question is, well, because we take care of patients as well and not seeing them sometimes face to face, sometimes where you're walking side by side.

So what's that interaction like? I'm just very curious about that actual interaction without looking at them face to face and just hearing them looking at the outside.

So it's interesting and it depends on the client but I think one of the things that I've realized is that there's a flexibility involved. We talk about cognitive flexibility as it relates to certain rigid thinking that sometimes people might have from an anxiety or depressive perspective.

When you walk, you start to notice your surroundings. You notice the trees, the birds, the path that you're walking on. There's sort of this naturalistic grounding that's taking place in that you're sort of externalizing yourself from what you're going through, in that you're being inquisitive about the environment.

And so as we walk, I think so many times there's conversations about just the nature and what's happening. And I think sometimes it's just helpful that even as we're walking, it's one of those things that helps people get outside of their heads.

Right? And I think sometimes the story of trauma or anxiety or depression is so close to us. And it's such a sort of a overrepresented identity of who we think we are, rather than this is what I'm going through.

This is how I can externalize it. And this is how I can maybe overcome it. And so I think there's just a lot of creativity that comes up as we walk and talk and i appreciate your perspective in that you know when you're sitting in a room and you're seeing cross from someone there's eye contact there you can see kind of like the body language and so from a walk and talk therapy perspective.

What i've noticed this is really interesting what i've noticed that from my male clients. It is really, really beneficial in that, I think, from a social cultural perspective, when you look at men and how they interact with each other.

So video games, right? So they're spending time with each other. They're sitting side by side, but they're playing video games or playing sports, you know, going bowling, playing, you know.

Oftentimes the interactions with men involves doing another activity side by side. And there can be a lot of stigma as relates to mental health and what that entails.

And it can be intimidating. I've had a lot of male clients who say, I don't want to go into a room and just sit and just look at someone and it can be intimidating.

And so what I've noticed is that sometimes walk and talk therapy is a good intro to traditional therapy for some folks. So maybe there's sort of that avoidance of those mental health things that are going on.

And so walk and talk therapy might be a nice slow introduction and maybe as the weather gets cold or maybe we're not able to walk and talk consistently, maybe then we transition into indoor settings where we can sit in front of each other.

So I definitely see it as not one or the other, but a both and approach. for people who maybe are skeptical of therapy but are wanting to learn and a nice way to kind of just bridge the gap.

Yeah, I've been seeing how this is maybe it's beautiful what you said is that it's easier to relate sometimes when you're both looking in the same direction and your bodies are next to each other.

And so you still feel like you're together, but you don't have to interact and like the interpreting signals coming from the other person's face, right?

Sometimes we edit ourselves because we anticipate what someone's going to think or say or feel. And I love that if you're looking in the same direction, you can't really do that editing, that self-editing.

And maybe there's a little secret weapon there, Phil.

Nature, Movement, and Emotional Openness

Well, it goes to the whole idea of nature-based therapy. You know, you said naturalistic. And I think nature is something that we're so devoid of on a daily basis until we really focus on it, until we say, oh, no, I need to touch the ground with my bare feet.

I don't even know what if, I mean, I think my son doesn't even know what it feels like to walk barefoot on grass. because he hasn't had that kind of experience.

And that experience with contact with nature, absorbing the oxygen around you, noticing the colors, the vibrancy, being out and breathing, you know, just out in natural air versus, you know, conditioned air.

It has an effect, that nature has an effect. I imagine, what have you noticed in that effect that nature provides while you're walking and doing therapy?

You know, we, uh, I think we talked about it on my podcast, but even the concept of light, right. And being outside, being under nature, being in that warmth, noticing the birds and the squirrels and trees.

There's so much I feel like that happens in that I find a lot of my clients will just talk. freely in that there's sort of this, there's not a barrier.

You know, I think there's a sense of that. There's just more freedom. And I think sometimes when you think about

what people go through on a day-to-day basis in terms of their suffering, sometimes there's not that window, I think, for a lot of people to look as it relates to how can I get out of this?

How can I fix this problem? And it's interesting, I feel like innately when you go outside and even you see the stars and you see the magnitude of nature and whether if you're by the ocean or the clouds, I think it just naturally helps your mind think in a different space.

And it's not that you can fix your problem right away, but I think it does instill a sense of hope in that I'm one step closer to trying to go into this tension of suffering and figure out some form of way that I can deal with it.

I don't know if that really answers your questions, but I think it just opens the mind up to the possibilities of what can happen for their condition.

Absolutely. I feel like we're asking our listeners to remember that when you walk, it's a state change, right? And if you can bring the state change into the body visibly in real time, that state change is reflected in the mental space as well.

You know, how do you see mental health treatment evolving to include lifestyle interventions, nutrition, exercise? the state change if we take this principle of like, yeah, walking is a simple way of just changing your dopamine, your serotonin.

And now you can talk a little bit easier because your barriers are a little bit lower and you can resource hope because somebody's right next to you and you're in nature.

And all of a sudden, you're feeling different. And yeah, out of your therapy session, the next hour, you could still be feeling that way. You're going to feel that lift, right?

But then we also realize that there's a moment when that lift slows down, right? Like when we can feel that state kind of go back to that default. So what are some things that you see people doing or you recommend people do or engage in to continue to access that state?

Yeah, the field of lifestyle medicine, behavioral medicine, health psychology, the biopsychosocial model. The not, the either or, but the both and. How we can see not just us in terms of our physical state, but our mental, our spiritual, and our social state as well.

And I think what's really cool is that, again, there's so much research that shows yoga-based methods to helping people with PTSD, doing nutritional interventions.

I mean, goodness, how that can change people's mindsets. And even as it relates to, I think, social support as well, one of the things that I think about for me when I conceptualize this is, okay, what are we doing to move our bodies?

What are we putting in our bodies as it relates to nutrition? And how will we sleeping in terms of the quality of our sleep?

Lifestyle Medicine and Behavioral Change

And that alone could help reduce a lot of anxiety or depression. And so when you couple that with psychotherapy, maybe with medication, now we're talking about all of these additives benefits.

And it's really cool that with walk and talk therapy, what I've noticed is that as a psychologist, you're mirroring to your patients and clients what it means to take care of yourself.

And so maybe now there's more motivation for them to walk on their own. Maybe you can do some psychoeducation and medical education as relates to walking.

consistently throughout the week. And the benefit of psychotherapy is that, you know, usually you're typically seeing your clients on a pretty consistent basis, maybe once a week, every two weeks.

So there's accountability. When you see your medical provider, maybe you only see them once a year every six months. But when I see more patients and clients, it's consistent.

So I can ask them, hey, how was it last week when you said you were going to walk three times a week? How was that? You know, and so I think it just puts the mindset more so on people's frontal cortex and that it's like, OK, I'm constantly thinking about this and ruminating on this.

So I feel like this is sort of a great open doorway to really talk about nutritional counseling, sleep medicine. I think once people really start to take hold of their lifestyle, and they become active participants in their health, we're trying to move away from a passive approach of Just giving someone a pill and saying, okay, you don't have to do anything.

It's like, no, when you come to psychotherapy, there's it's going to be work. It's going to take time. When you come walk and talk therapy, when you're trying to figure out exercise and nutrition, it's going to take time.

You're investing in yourself. And it's a lifestyle because for the rest of your lifestyle, this is now becoming a part of who you are, not just what you do.

So I just think it's a great open doorway to talk about all of those other benefits of health. So what would you say are some of the limitations of doing this sort of therapy, physical, emotional, somebody's got social anxiety or doesn't want to go outside their home or doesn't have the energy or has pain?

What would be things that, how do you convince patients to do this or what is that like? Yeah, I think the beauty of psychotherapy now is that there's a lot of virtual sessions that are happening and I don't think virtual therapy is going away.

And so often actually what I've done with a lot of my patients as relates to maybe treatment resistant depression where they don't want to go outside, they don't want to get out of bed.

But can they have the therapy session virtually? And maybe do they have a treadmill in their home? And we've done walk and talk therapy sessions virtually, where people are walking and are able to just be in their home.

And so I think sometimes when it relates to social anxiety, even when it relates to access, right, not everyone has a car, not everyone maybe has the means for public transportation maybe it takes a long time to get to a certain place and so what are the things that i can do to think i'm inside of the box to help people in that case and then i think maybe even going back to that social support piece you know for people who maybe do actually like to take walks in their neighborhood or things like that can they bring other people into that so many communities have formed from walking in social media groups and things like that.

And so I think really just meeting people where they're at, being able to collaborate on maybe certain solutions that can happen. I will say, you know, when it comes to walk and talk therapy, there are pros and cons and things that clinicians should think about as relates to privacy.

For example, if you're walking in public, we try and go to parks that are typically quiet, but you know, from a legal perspective, right, I would consult with an attorney or someone just to make sure that you have reduction or as relates to informed consent.

And you're talking with your patients that hey, there might be some privacy issues, right? As we talk about things in a public setting, it's possible something you can overhear.

So being able to make sure that from a document perspective that you're good to go. But then also, yeah, just being able to meet people where they're at, in that one of some things that we can just take that first step in helping

you where you're I think I'll be prescribing 30 minutes or an hour of walk and talk therapy to my patients.

Is there a source? You mentioned communities that love for my patients to really consider this. Tell us more about how somebody would access this sort of therapy.

Yes. You know, in a perfect world, man, what would society look like if you went to your medical provider and they said, hey, while you're in the waiting room, go ahead and meet with the health coach that's on the hospital.

Just do a few, maybe a little walk and talk with them and then just get warmed up for 20 minutes. And then you can come into the room and we can see you three minutes.

Right. What would it look like in a society where we could embed walk and talk therapy within medical practices? Wow. I love that. I would love to do walk and talk medical care.

And because it just, it changes the narrative when, you know, I think as medical providers, you tell your patients often, right?

Limitations, Access, and Privacy Considerations

You need to exercise. And it goes one in one year, out the other, you know. But if the medical community is mirroring this and is talking about it and is promoting it, that's where maybe some things start to shift.

I am, you know, in the process of hopefully, you know, Hopefully trying to get through some formal education and certification on this because I think it would be beautiful if clinicians could get educated on this and try and figure out how to incorporate this into their own medical practice.

And so right now there's just not a lot of resources. There's not a lot of clinicians that are doing this. I mean, this could be like a huge movement.

I mean, imagine people in their meetings, there was a business meeting that we had a few years ago, we were meeting with some executives for a company, we're just doing some education for them about mental health.

And one of the executives was like on the treadmill, like as the meeting was happening. And that is a great example of what it looks like to mirror to your employees.

I'm prioritizing my health. Yes, this meeting is important, but your health is important too. And so how can we as a community also mirror that to our patients?

Long story short, to answer your question, I think this is a building process. where I'm trying to figure out certain certifications to help people, other clinicians, and then trying to go out and do these podcasts to get the word out there.

And hopefully, you know, with time, you know, things can kind of shift and this could be just more natural. Hopefully, five, 10 years from now, everyone's doing walk and talk and it's not even a big deal.

We don't even blink an eye, right? I love that integrative medicine. I think there's a place there for walk and talk therapy right there. Can you share a story of, or an example without the clinical details where this kind of integrated care made a significant difference in patient outcomes?

Cause I think that's where, you know, the rubber meets the road. It's like, yes, what you're saying makes absolute sense. You know, and even on this podcast, we've talked about how exercise equals to increased mitochondria.

and mitochondria are the powerhouse of not just the cell but the body. And I think you're right, the science is absolutely established. And yet again, we're talking about how do you break down the barriers to the adoption of something that can be pretty simple and pretty elegantly done and show a lot of caring.

I mean, I just love the example you gave. If somebody can't get out of bed and has social anxiety, can they walk in their room? And just that shows that somebody's helping themselves.

And that's a first step. So I love just the visual of it. And my question is, are there any treadmills do you recommend? I'm not sponsored by any companies, but you know, honestly, I like to work with clients in terms of what they have.

And I mentioned this on my podcast, but I'm a certified personal trainer. You all mentioned that in my intro as well. And one of the things that I've always tried to try and figure out in my mind is like how to bridge these worlds together.

Because I think there's just so much, you know, someone can see a nutritionist and then they see their psychotherapist and then they see their medical doctor and then they see their psychiatrist and it's all of like five or six different worlds and there's nothing wrong with those worlds but they're not really integrating in one setting not all really communicating together and so many of my patients sometimes they'll come to me and they'll say you know what taking this medication but I really want to try and do this naturally.

And I've always come from the perspective of like, there's a need for medication, right?

Integrating Therapy With Medical Care

Medication is not bad or anything like that. I know sometimes it can be a stigma with psychotropic medication, but for people who are maybe wanting to try other alternative ways of medicine, Like, okay, where can we start?

Let's start with exercise and let's start with moving your body. And literally I will prescribe, I want you to walk three times a week and we'll talk about next week, how it goes for you.

And I had a client who there was treatment resistant depression. And in psychotherapy, one of the things that we talk about in cognitive behavioral therapy is this aspect of behavioral activation.

in that you can have these negative thoughts that impact your emotions that therefore then impact your behavior. And oftentimes we wanna change the thoughts.

We wanna like rewire our thoughts. But one of the best ways to do so is to just target the behavior. And so in terms of just movement, it can create a shift in your emotion.

And then that shift in emotion maybe starts to change how you think about movement. And then that pattern can repeat. And with that social support and that coaching, it can actually become a lifestyle and it can become a part of who someone is at that point.

And so I've had so many of my clients re-engage in exercise and then we start to bridge it out as it relates to things like nutritional counseling and sleep medicine.

And so it is definitely a step-by-step process, but I think one of the things that I've seen is the amazing ability for people to realize that it just takes one step, just one step.

One step. We can go from there. Yeah. Yeah. That's an important step to really highlight that it does, that one step can lead to so much change and so much hope, as you said.

I think what Simi was asking is the story around hope and the change around seeing oneself out of that story. emerging out of that, that narrative, that stuck narrative that tends to persist, especially in that default mode system that the depression tends to activate that illuminating pattern, that that one step can break us away from that movement can take us out of that.

We can be in a set and setting where we are seen, heard and understood and connect with nature and have

somebody just be at our side. versus being analyzed or being looked at.

I just love that this idea for me has opened up another way of seeing, you know, what we can do better in healthcare, really. So thank you. You know, one thing I also wanted to add to that is, so I did personal training on the side throughout graduate school.

That was kind of like my science. And one of the things that I've started to do for some of my clients who are maybe wanting some additional support as it relates to personal training is we'll do walk and talk therapy, but I might try and create some exercise programs for them as well based on their fitness goals.

And one of the really interesting things as a personal trainer that you get to see is that you get to see people's transformation. You get to see someone come in and they're not sure how to do a swim or a lunge.

They're not sure how to, we do the battle ropes and we push like a sled with a lot of the weight on there. And to be able to see the self-esteem and transformational like confidence from start to finish, Like, it's mind blowing because for them, I think it shifts the mindset of more hope, more belief in themselves, more confidence, and you see a reduction in anxiety and depression.

all from the context of a therapeutic relationship, but also from an encouragement for someone to take an active approach in their lifestyle. I think Peter Tia speaks to this idea of not the lifespan.

I don't want to live longer. I want to live healthier. I want to be in a healthy mindset. I want my body to be in a healthy place because when that injury happens, and you fall because you're unstable or you're weak over time and then that cascades into depression because like now i'm hurt and injured and now i can't get out of bed and that debilitating feeling right in the body also is a mental feeling and how that cycles and spirals into so many other things so It does bring in that, you know, your body is your vessel, you know, and it's going to carry you through that.

Whatever you bring that in. And I love the concept of embodiment as you're doing therapy. And as you're talking, I'm recognizing that embodying greater confidence.

while you're experiencing greater confidence of yourself, right? So both things are happening is kind of like there's a system that's suddenly firing together.

Yes. Yes. Right? Yes. Yes. I mean, for someone who, let's say they're having a hard time at work or having a hard time difficulty with their relationships, But they're learning that their body can do so much more than they even imagined.

Training Clinicians and Modeling Healthy Habits

Now they're lifting weights, they're doing squats with kettlebells, they're running, they're cycling, and they're realizing that their body is made for so much more.

And I do believe that carries over into their lives. That when they see difficult situations or stress or current stress or future stress, they have a different approach, a different mindset, a different attitude in that I've been through tough things.

I can go through this, I can get through this. And then when they have people like you and medical providers and clinicians in their corner that also believe in them as well, I mean, I just think what a beautiful collaboration.

I want to ask you, what advice would you give? So you're now a mentor and a coach. So you're actually helping people to realize not just from the perspective of the clinical diagnosis, but also just other psychologists and trainers like yourself who want to incorporate more movement-based or holistic practices into their work.

So what kind of advice do you give to your peers and those coming after you that you're training? Yes. So, you

know, one of the things that. I tell a lot of my clinicians and my peers, you know, being able to do what you can do.

There is so much, so much that as clinicians we can do. I'm thinking of even certain institutions that would see therapy clients, but the community mental health center was attached to a gym and just a beautiful collaboration of saying, Hey, you know what, maybe we should meet at the gym today.

Maybe we can meet outside today. And of course, you know, again, being able to have those boundaries and those conversations about confidentiality and consent, but being able to empower clinicians that this is doable.

This is very, very, very doable. But you know, it's hard to mirror something when you aren't maybe embodying that yourself. And so I always think about the concept of self-care for clinicians and what are clinicians doing for themselves?

Are they living amongst themselves? Are they passionate about nutrition and helping themselves? Because I think patients can sense that, you know, I think sometimes They can sense if a clinician's coming from a place of maybe personal experience, or they can sense, you know, I've had clients where sometimes they can see their clinicians riding their bicycle to the therapy practice.

That is a subtle image that speaks volumes to health, right? And so I think those nuanced ways of what we as clinicians embody from our seminars, and then the small steps that we can take to maybe go outside the box to help our patients.

Patience is one step. And as we close here, I'd like to also let our audience know that Phil will maybe provide us some list of healthy, maybe walking treadmills or activities in the show notes and can add that in in your references to different ways and means that people can really embody this practice.

And of course, your recommendations. Maybe you should get sponsored. Absolutely. And here's what I'll say. I'll say this too. There's so much in the personal training space where it's like there's like information overload.

And one of the best things that you can do is resistant training. Anyone and everyone would benefit from resistant training, squats, lunges, and planks.

those three things. If you want to keep it simple, you can keep it simple. And so for those of you, I'll definitely leave down some links below to my YouTube channel and things like that that people can check out and just start moving.

Health Psychology and Future Collaboration

Thank you. Wonderful. Thank you so much. One of the final questions that we ask people are what are they curious about? What's the next thing that you're curious about or what's getting you interested?

Because you're doing the thing that you believe in, you know, you're combining it, you're living that and maybe corollary to that because you've talked about health psychology and that to me is a new topic for most people.

I think you've displayed a lot of what we mean. You know, you've talked a lot about what we mean by health psychology, but what role do you think health psychology will play in shaping the future of healthcare?

And then what else are you curious about? I think health psychology will continue to bridge the gap between psychologists, mental health professionals, and medical providers like yourselves.

I think there is so much research that shows that medical providers and mental health professionals should be working in the same facilities in the same context because we see the physical and the mental shift back and forth.

And what would it look like to see a medical provider and then right after that you see your psychologist? And they can give you a plan, not just for your medical health, but also your mental health as well.

And so yeah, I just see that beautiful partnership continuing as relates to chronic pain, sleep difficulties. I mean providers can prescribe certain things like there's certain things that I can't do that you all can do.

And there's things and knowledge where there's there's gaps in knowledge that we both can kind of bridge together. So I see a beautiful collaboration there.

And then in terms of what I'm curious about, I have been very curious about spiritual origin stories in that regardless of if someone's religious or spiritual, just thinking about the story of someone in terms of their life.

And it relates kind of back to the biopsychosocial model, but really like. What is the spiritual story that someone keeps telling themselves? What is the purpose that they keep telling themselves?

What is their mission in life? What's the thing that they want people to talk about when they're gone? The legacy is the lead behind. And so I've just been fascinated by that and just trying to be mindful and curious for my own spiritual origin and others.

That's a very solid question. That's an awesome question. I think we should definitely have another podcast on that. You ask a child this question and they'll give the answer.

You ask an adult and they might not be able to remember. Thanks for joining us on the To Curious, MD podcast. We hope today's episode inspired you to ask new questions and explore fresh perspectives.

We challenge you to ask us those unasked questions that you're curious about in your medical practice, condition, health and wellness. If you enjoyed the podcast, don't forget to subscribe, share it with somebody just as curious and leave us a review.

It helps us keep the curiosity alive. Post a comment with a question or curious inquiry that you have and seek to explore or learn with us. Stay curious and we'll see you next time.