

The Daily Helping Episode 303:
Dr. Crystal Morrison

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:00:00] It's a very big risk for me to step out and do the work that I'm doing today. But it's a bigger risk to not do anything, to accept the status quo and accept the system for the way it is today.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:00:20] Hello and welcome to The Daily Helping with Dr. Richard Shuster, food for the brain, knowledge from the experts, tools to win at life. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. Whoever you are, wherever you're from, and whatever you do, this is the show that is going to help you become the best version of yourself. Each episode you will hear from some of the most amazing, talented, and successful people on the planet who followed their passions and strived to help others. Join our movement to get a million people each day to commit acts of kindness for others. Together, we're going to make the world a better place. Are you ready? Because it's time for your Daily Helping.

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of The Daily Helping podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Richard, and I am so excited to share the brilliance of our guest with you today. Her name is Dr. Crystal G. Morrison, a highly regarded executive advisor, strategist, leader, scientist, and tech entrepreneur.

I'm going to totally skip her origin story because I'm going to share it with you in a minute. But what she has created is a remarkable platform. She has been named one of the top ten young startups. She won a really prestigious award for social impact and innovation through her technology platform, Meerkat Village, which she co-founded and leads. It's a software company dedicated to helping improve outcomes for children with special needs by building collaboration and communication among adults providing care. Dr. Crystal, welcome to The Daily Helping. It is awesome to have you with us today.

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:02:04] Thank you so much, Dr. Richard.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:02:05] So, I kind of teased it so now everybody's excited. You've built this incredible platform and I want to go back in time and hop in that DeLorean and learn your kind of superhero origin story. What put you on the path you're on today?

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Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:02:24] Well, I think that depends on how far we want to go back. Certainly, as it relates to Meerkat Village, I'm a mom of three teenagers. My kiddos are 14, 17, and 19. Two of my children were adopted. All of them have tremendously unique personalities. One of my children is autistic.

And so, as part of that journey of adopting children and having a child with neurodiversity, I spent a lot of time interfacing with caregivers, and providers, social workers, therapists, educators, a huge village of people who've been supporting my children over the years.

And as you know, the system of care is very complex. It's very time consuming. And I just intrinsically knew that there was a better way to be able to collaborate and communicate with my children's treatment teams. And that is part of what led to Meerkat Village.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:03:38] So, for those listening to this and, yes, we had a private discussion prior to hitting the record button, where we expressed our disdain for the system as it exists today. But, you know, if somebody doesn't have a child with special needs or has never had to navigate the system, could you talk us through what the frustrations are, what the pain points are for a parent who has to deal with some of this?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:04:04] Well, I would say, pre-diagnosis, let's say, maybe your child is in preschool or already in school, there's lots of challenges with the conventional classroom. People are giving you recommendations on what to do, and who to see, and who to talk to. Maybe your child's been identified as a child that's just very difficult and no one wants to help you.

And so, as a parent, when there's something going on with your child, you're probably trying to do anything under the sun to help your child. I know that's the case for me when it comes to my children. And, you know, I knew for years that my child had some very different needs than other children and I sought to find him care. At that time, I lived in Northern New Mexico and it was extremely difficult to find resources. It's a very rural area, not a lot of health care resources. So, that was pre-diagnosis.

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I continued to push and try to figure out what was going on. And through that advocacy for him, we did find a doctor that had much more clarity, and a diagnosis was made at the time. And that helped open the door to more services. Now, that's great, but it's also very, very overwhelming. It's overwhelming when you receive a diagnosis for your child, but it's also overwhelming in terms of what to do next. And I had lots of acronyms of different agencies and different resources thrown at me. But I didn't really know how to navigate that.

Then, even after services were set up, I was spending a fulltime job, almost, trying to keep the the preschool teacher, and the after school provider, and the therapist, and extended family members that were supporting me, trying to keep them on the same page as to what was going on and the types of things that we could be doing to support my child. And so, that's the experience that I've had. That's what it looks like. And that's an experience that millions of people, I'm sure many of your listeners also understand.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:06:41] How many hours would you say in a given week that you were dedicating to managing all of the therapy, the medical appointments, all of these different services?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:06:50] So, I was trying to do this while working fulltime and I would say, you know, just the management piece was anywhere from four to five hours to ten hours, maybe some week, just sending emails back and forth and playing phone tag with different people. So, yeah, on a weekly basis, of course, sometimes more hours than others.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:07:18] And so, you said that this was one of the things that kind of really pushed you towards the direction of creating Meerkat Village. What was the other piece of inspiration?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:07:28] So, the other piece of inspiration is something that's very personal and it is something that I've talked about a lot more in the past year, and that is my own struggle with mental health over the years, and my own struggle as a child with an eating disorder and mental health diagnoses.

Now, I grew up in rural Arkansas. And back in the early '80s, people weren't necessarily

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talking about eating disorders and there certainly weren't a lot of professionals that were skilled in treating individuals with eating disorders and mental health issues. And certainly not a lot of people in rural Arkansas that had that understanding and knowledge.

And so, for me, my family worked with my pediatrician, of course. But I had this tremendous extended family, my grandparents, aunts and uncles, but also community members, church members that really surrounded me and provided me with a lot of support and care. And that had a huge impact on my ability to be able to get help, receive help, and heal over the years.

And so, my own journey, not only as a mom parenting a child that has additional needs, but as an individual knowing what I went through as a child and the village of people that came together to support me and my family. And so, an important aspect of Meerkat Village today is that it includes, not only the professional supports like therapists and providers, but also natural supports like extended family members, community leaders who have a tremendous role in supporting the care of the child.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:09:32] So, I get the expression, it takes a village, right?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:09:36] Sure. Yeah.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:09:38] But why Meerkat Village? Why the name Meerkat Village?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:09:41] So, you know, I'm a scientist, Dr. Richard, and I find this absolutely fascinating. But meerkats in the wild, if you don't know, they live in these really interconnected communities of meerkats where all of the adult meerkats participate in raising the baby meerkats and protecting each other. And so, the idea that my co-founder, Dan, "What if we just behaved a lot more like meerkats? You know, just this close knit community that really looks out, protects each other, and has each other's care in mind."

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:10:21] I'm feeling the urge to sing copyrighted Disney Lion King. But this is really cool. So, you've kind of teased this a little bit who the platform is

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for. So, tell us exactly, like let's just dive deep into Meerkat Village. What does it do exactly? How does it work? We know it's for parents and extended family and providers, like let's do deep dive Meerkat Village.

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:10:53] Sounds great. So, Meerkat Village, you can, as a parent, subscribe to Meerkat Village and download the app and create a digital village for your child. Now, the three main functions of Meerkat Village are what we call team, do, and track. So, after you create the village for your child, you can invite all of the people who are supporting your child into the digital village simply by entering their name and their email address. And very important, Meerkat Village is HIPAA and FERPA compliant, so there's no issue about security or compliance.

You invite those people into your child's village, they download the app and join your child's village. And within the team function, you can chat back and forth with the entire team about what's going on, updates. It's similar to a group text but, of course, it's within the platform, so it's safe and secure.

With the do function, you can create strategies. And anyone in the team, in the village can create a strategy to support your child. So, it may be a strategy to support a child's sensory needs or maybe a visual schedule for transitions. So, you can create those strategies and then agree to follow through in those strategies, whether it be in the classroom or at grandma's house or an after school.

And then, the third function is track, and this is where we can actually track the child's response over time, and get a better understanding of if what we're doing is actually improving outcomes for that child. And so, it's not only about communication and collaboration, it's about staying accountable to the things we say we're going to do to support the child, and also figuring out if what we're doing is helping them over time. And if maybe it's not, let's change, let's pivot and do something different.

So, again, it's a platform. You can use it on your phone. It's very user friendly. And people have definitely benefited by using Meerkat Village and building that community around their child.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:13:12] Can you share a couple of success stories? I'd love to hear.

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:13:14] Yeah. Yeah. So, one example is when the first village was created in our pilot program. I love to share this story because within an hour, within an hour, the mother had all of their child's treatment team in the digital village. She had sent the invitations and they had all accepted the invitations, and joined, and were in the platform. They were communicating back and forth.

Now, that's an hour. The reason that gets me so excited is because I would often spend weeks trying to get everybody's schedules aligned to be able to get a meeting together where everybody can communicate. But she was able to get everybody on the same page and communicating at the same time within an hour. And I think that's just a tremendous example.

One other example that I love to give, which is a little different, is my child is now off on his own and in college, and he's actually using Meerkat Village to, not only communicate with me and his therapist, but also to create focus time during his day and acknowledge whether he followed through in that focus time. And so, it's helping him be accountable to creating focus time in his day to be able to focus on his schoolwork. And so, that's sort of a very different example, but one that I love to share because it's it's an example of how Meerkat can be used, not only for small children, but even as they grow into adults.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:15:06] Was that piece of what your son is using it for was that an intended functionality or kind of discovered it?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:15:12] No. It wasn't. It wasn't an intended functionality. But, again, part of Meerkat Village is keeping accountability. And so, when he was getting ready to go back to school for the semester, we were talking about strategies with a visual schedule and how to help keep him focused. And I was like, "Well, you know what? We could use Meerkat Village for this." And so, that's what we did. And I've shared that example with other people who are now considering it for their adult children as well.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:15:45] That's really, really cool. And what bodies of research have dug into Meerkat Village and what are they starting to find?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:15:54] So, we have a study that's starting soon with the University of Pittsburgh. That study is going to focus on the usability of Meerkat Village, especially when it comes to much more diverse populations of users.

We also have a smaller study that's going on in a county here in western Pennsylvania focused on village-driven care. And that study is more focused around the methodology of really engaging the entire community of natural and professional supports for children. And Meerkat Village is a tool that's being used in the study.

So, we're very early on, you know, intrinsically. We definitely believe by building the collaboration and communication that we're going to be able to improve outcomes, without question, for children over time. And we're starting to see some examples of that. We are early on, but we do have ongoing research programs and new ones started to probe that even further.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:17:04] I get really excited about new technology platforms that can do so much good in the world. At the risk of having the whole audience sign a non-disclosure agreement, tell us about what's coming to Meerkat Village that you can talk about anyway. What are some of the exciting things that are coming to the platform?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:17:26] Yeah. So, one of the things that I'm excited about what's coming down the line is, not only the ability to build a community of support around your child, but to be able to build different communities of support as it relates to your own situation.

So, maybe you have a community within Meerkat Village that is children of a similar age with a similar diagnosis. Maybe there's an additional community with a subject matter expert that is doing discussions on trauma informed care. Maybe there's an additional community that's more close to your geography, perhaps in your state or region. And so, we're really excited about building out those spheres of community within the

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platform as well to provide more resources and support, including support that is curated with subject matter experts and certain fields.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:18:32] When you think about Meerkat Village 10, 15, 20, 100 years from now, what is your legacy for this?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:18:43] So, I not only want to dramatically improve outcomes for millions of children. I see Meerkat Village as this tremendous avenue to be able to inform and create entirely new methodologies of care. Because if we can start to really build upon this body of data where we can analyze the actions of treatment teams and outcomes for the child, we can become incredibly more informed about what's working and what's not working in treatment. We can develop more personalized care, but also inform, like I said, entirely new methodologies of care.

And, to me, that's tremendously exciting because, you know, we've been doing the things the same old way for a long time and we're constantly learning. And that, to me, is the legacy that I want to leave is, not only dramatically impacting the lives of millions of children, but also impacting my grandchildren and my great grandchildren, and the way that they receive care and the way that we perceive and accept care in our lives.

Because Meerkat Village is really about village-driven care. And this idea that we all at different times in our life need care and have a village of support. And so, that's a big legacy and it's definitely one that I believe in and I see in the future.

One aspect that I think is really important is that a part of the work that I'm doing now as a leader, as an R&D leader, I've cultivated my leadership skills over the years to really be about empowering teams and empowering people. And one of the things that's important to me in the work that I'm doing with Meerkat Village now is to also empower parents and guardians.

This is a very overwhelming experience and I want them to feel empowered as the subject matter expert on their child, to be comfortable asking questions and seeking out resources, and really looking at the people supporting them and surrounding them as a team. And so, I really do want people to think about Meerkat Village as an opportunity to

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empower themselves as parents and empower the treatment teams around their children as well.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:21:13] I think this is really an important piece because, number one, the the number of people who have a child with autism or learning differences is astounding. Those numbers are growing exponentially. And we don't have enough time in three episodes to discuss the reasons why science thinks this is happening, but it's happening.

And so, you know, many parents feel absolutely overwhelmed and absolutely isolated. And, yes, there are Facebook Groups. And, yes, you might find a kid at your school who has some kind of an issue. But this is way deeper than that, because Facebook Groups aren't really empowerment-driven, and so this is an opportunity to help a parent feel as though they do have these other meerkats running around with them that can help uplift them, and that's outstanding. I absolutely love the work that you're doing.

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:22:21] Thank you so much.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:22:22] All right. So, Dr. Crystal, I love the work that you're doing. As you know, I wrap up every episode of my show by asking my guests a single question, and that is, what is your biggest helping? That one most important piece of information you'd like somebody to walk away with after hearing our conversation today.

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:22:41] So, that one big helping is a quote that's absolutely my favorite quote. I have it posted here in my office. And that is "Status quo is a bigger risk than the unknown." And that's something that I live by, and so it's a very big risk for me to step out and do the work that I'm doing today. But it's a bigger risk to not do anything, to accept the status quo and accept the system for the way it is today. So, that's what I want people to take away and remember from our conversation today.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:23:21] I love that quote.

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:23:23] It's great, isn't it?

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:23:24] I'm going to start using that quote, sharing that quote.

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Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:23:27] And you believe that, too. I know you do.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:23:30] I thoroughly do. Who said it? Do you know who said that quote?

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:23:33] You know, I've never been able to find the source for that, honestly. It's been attributed to lots and lots of different people. But I think it's just really, really solid words.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:23:47] Yeah. It's beautifully said. Dr. Crystal, tell us where people can learn more about Meerkat Village and then how they sign up.

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:23:56] Yeah. So, go to our website, meerkatvillage.com. You can learn more about the platform there. You will also be able to sign up for the subscription very soon on the platform. And then, you can download the app from the App Store or Google Play. You're also welcome, of course, to follow us on social media, Instagram and Facebook, to follow our journey and learn more, and that's Meerkat Village in both cases.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:24:25] Well, Dr. Crystal, thank you so much for not only sharing your story with us, but doing the amazing work that you're doing making the world a better place. I loved having you on today.

Dr. Crystal Morrison: [00:24:35] Thank you so much, Dr. Richard. It's been a pleasure.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:24:38] Absolutely. And I want to thank each and every one of you as well who took time out of your day to listen to this conversation. If you liked it, if you got something out of it, go give us a follow on Apple Podcasts and leave us a five star review, because that is what helps other people find the show. But most importantly, go out there today and do something nice for somebody else, even if you don't know who they are, and post it in your social media feeds using the hashtag #MyDailyHelping, because the happiest people are those that help others.