

## Summary

- In this episode of Aging For All, hosts Jen Yanez Pryor and Andrea Price engage with Dr. Kristin McDonald, an expert in healthcare management and compassion in long-term care. Dr. McDonald shares her journey from clinical nutrition to academia, emphasizing the importance of compassion in caregiving and its impact on workforce well-being. The conversation explores how organizations can foster compassion among caregivers, the significance of compassionate leadership, and the need for networks that support healthcare professionals. The discussion also highlights the challenges of aging and the importance of preparing future healthcare leaders to embrace and understand the aging population.

## Takeaways

- Compassion is distinct from sympathy and empathy.
- The experience of compassion at work enhances caregiver well-being.
- Organizations can foster compassion through understanding employee needs.
- Compassionate leadership is crucial for retention in healthcare.
- Creating networks can help caregivers feel less isolated.
- Compassionate care leads to better patient outcomes.
- Understanding aging is essential for all healthcare professionals.
- Elevating the profession of CNAs is necessary for workforce stability.
- Compassion affects caregivers' intentions to stay in the field.
- Students must connect with the aging population in their future careers.

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:01.644)

Hello and welcome to Aging For All. We're your hosts. I'm Jen Yanez-Pryor.

Aging For All (00:06.358)

And I'm Andrea Price. Thank you all so much for joining us today.

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:10.936)

Today, our special guest is Dr. Kristin MacDonald. Kristin is an assistant professor in the Department of Health Administration at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her research focuses on experienced compassion at work, well-being, and long-term care workforces. She enjoys teaching courses on person-centered care, healthcare management and performance, and service learning. Kristin has worked as a nursing home administrator, adult care home administrator, clinical dietitian,

and she has operated her own private nutrition counseling practice. She was previously an adjunct instructor for health services and health administration students at Methodist University in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and received an Excellence in Service to Students Award in 2017. As an adult care home administrator, Dr. MacDonald Organization was featured in US News and World Report's Best Nursing Homes list.

receiving a five-star rating for health inspections, staffing, and quality measures. She has also guided this facility through a zero-deficiency state survey in 2012, and her organization received state-level recognition for the adoption of person-centered care. Kristen earned her doctorate in health services, organization, and research from Virginia Commonwealth University, a master's degree in healthcare policy and management from Stony Brook University,

and a bachelor's degree in nutritional sciences from Cornell University. She is also proud to have been selected as a 2023 Tillman scholar. Hello and welcome, Kristin.

Kristin MacDonald (01:48.241)

Thanks for having me.

Aging For All (01:50.516)

Yes, we are so excited to have you today. You have such a diverse and a long history of doing some amazing work in healthcare, and we're happy for our guests and for us to learn more about you and your work. So please share a little bit about your journey to academia.

Kristin MacDonald (02:08.906)

Yeah, well, I think Jen's introduction shares a lot of my background, but really my roots are in clinical nutrition. I started as a registered dietitian in long-term care and very quickly fell in love with that setting working in nursing homes. As much as I enjoy being involved in individual patient encounters,

I knew also with my background in healthcare policy and management that I would probably want to pursue a career in administration. And early on in my career was able to become a nursing home administrator. I'm a military spouse and so that has afforded me the opportunity to live and work in different states. And so I've practiced as an administrator in both Maryland and Kansas.

And it was the organization that I worked for in Kansas that really ignited a passion for the research that I conduct today. So it was a very unique nursing home that was owned and operated by a Benedictine monastery. And the sisters or nuns who lived in this community on one side of the physical plant of the organization lived independently. And on the other side for their aging sisters,

created a licensed nursing home. And between those two physical spaces was a dining room where they could come together for their meals. And it was really this beautiful care model that the organization also really extended that love to its employees. And in that setting, I developed a real heart for the very direct care workers working with the residents. I really wanted to understand better what made certified nursing assistants enjoy their jobs.

and stay in their jobs and the role of the organization and management in making that happen. And so that's what kind of led me to the research that I conduct today. And also my opportunity

to do adjunct teaching is what led me to want to be in the classroom educating the next generation of healthcare leaders.

Jen Yanez Pryor (04:18.101)

I love that. I love that story so much. So let's let's talk a little bit about the research you do. I know that your main focus is on compassion. Could you tell us a little bit about what it means to see that show up like in the workplace?

Kristin MacDonald (04:37.352)

Sure. I think, you know, first I will start by kind of describing what compassion is and how it's distinct from some other kind of adjacent concepts and then describe what the experience of compassion at work is. So when I talk to students too about compassion, I contrast it to sympathy and empathy.

So, sympathy is really this experience where we kind of feel sorry for someone, right? You you think about expressing sympathy when someone has a loved one who's passed away. I'm so sorry for your loss. Empathy is seeing that someone is suffering and having a response where you kind of put yourself in their shoes. You understand the experience of that other person. What compassion is, is seeing the suffering

having an empathetic response, kind of engaging in sense making about what is going on, and then taking action to alleviate the suffering for that other person, doing something behavioral to try to provide relief. And so compassion is innate to the practice of caregiving and to nursing practice. But we also know that there are benefits of compassion for employees who experience it in the workplace.

And my research really looks at defining the experience of Compassion at Work for long-term care, direct care workers as their ability to provide compassion to their care recipients, but also be on the receiving end of compassion from a variety of different actors, their supervisors, their coworkers, and even the residents themselves can display compassion back towards their caregivers.

because there's really this unique opportunity in long-term care, like the nursing home setting, for people, caregivers and care recipients to engage in relationship building over an extended period of time. So, I, from my experience of witnessing these relationships in nursing homes, truly entered my research.

Kristin MacDonald (06:55.609)

Believing that this experience of compassion for caregivers was really important to their well-being on the job and part of what really makes them want to stay when they do want to stay.

Aging For All (07:06.828)

That's amazing. So I think the compassion piece is, we would think it was inherent, but it sometimes has to be fostered. So in your work, how have you seen organizations or facilities do this successfully? And what does it look like in practice? Kind of touched on it a little bit, but what is this?

Kristin MacDonald (07:26.272)

Yeah, so some of those great examples that I have seen from organizations doing it really well are things like, well, it starts with an understanding of their workforce, you know, understanding some of the like social determinant of health issues that this population of caregivers face in their own lives. Things like food insecurity, lower socioeconomic status, and creating things like a food pantry.

where employees can come and get resources. I know the organization that I spoke about did that, I think specifically during COVID times. In nursing homes, employees often have to, if there's an emergency like a blizzard or a snowstorm, stay and spend the night. And really leaning in and making sure accommodations for those employees are...

very comfortable because they are spending time away from their own families to care for the care recipients in that setting. Having an emergency relief fund where employees without many questions asked can, you know, once a year request some funds for things like taking care of a broken down car or paying for a medical bill that needs attention. So those are just some examples. know one more was providing regular meals.

for the one meal during each shift worked for employees at that dining room that I mentioned. So those are examples of what compassion can look like for sure.

Jen Yanez Pryor (09:03.265)

Yeah, those are excellent examples. And I'm wondering if you have any others that, because a lot of these, think, you know, people who are in charge of whether it's a nursing home or an assisted living or any type of organization, because you can apply compassion everywhere, right? You know, they may be thinking, well, those things would be nice, but we don't have money for that. What other things could we do that

you know, wouldn't require whole lot of, you know, financial assistance, especially given that, you know, we're often working with tight budgets.

Kristin MacDonald (09:40.627)

Yeah, so it's a really interesting and certainly challenging question because we know that often organizations in the long-term care industry are less highly resourced than other sectors of healthcare. My research right now really looked at what are the effects of compassion for CNAs. I found that it increases well-being in terms of their meaningfulness of work.

you know, the purpose and significance they find in their work, their psychological vitality, the energy and vigor that they have on their job and their resilience, their ability to thrive in the face

of challenging circumstances, including challenging circumstances on the job because providing long-term care is hard. So the next layer of my research is actually hoping to involve qualitative interviews with CNAs to ask them the question.

What does compassion look like to you? What could managers and coworkers do in your organization that would be meaningful and compassionate to you? Because I think I can share some of these examples of things that I know worked, but I wanna hear from the CNAs themselves, what matters to you? And I heard bits and pieces of that as I conducted my research because I did do in-person surveys with the CNAs and themes of what I heard.

also boil down to things like respect and dignity communicated from the top down within the organizations, understanding of the challenges in the job, you know, and being a listening ear. And those things are a little bit less tangible than the examples I gave earlier, but I think we can't lose sight of how important that is for these care workers. And maybe we do need to understand in a more fine-grain way how we can formalize that in these organizations and what it looks like.

Aging For All (11:37.812)

Absolutely. And as you're talking about this work, I keep thinking about the students also. Why is it important for the students to know about this work and know about how to be compassionate as they go on maybe to lead these organizations that will be doing this work?

Kristin MacDonald (11:53.852)

Yeah, absolutely. mean, it's a con, this discussion of compassion for the caregivers themselves in organizational settings is something we talk about in my person-centered care class a lot, because I think the quality of the healthcare workers' experience on the job directly relates to the quality of care that patients are receiving. And if we can make our organizations more employee-centered and we take care of those who are doing the caregiving,

then we will see positive outcomes for the patients as well.

Jen Yanez Pryor (12:29.569)

That's excellent. You know, I'm thinking too, I know we do place a lot of emphasis on our, you know, direct customer service staff, right? The people who are doing the bulk of that frontline work. But we also know that, you know, this is something that applies to all humans. And so thinking of, you know, those people who are higher up, you know, you think of the administrators, the managers, you know,

know, physicians, you your external partners and all of that, you know, you know, how do we create this cyclical where it goes around and around, you know, I, I don't want this conversation. I don't want people walking away thinking we're only looking at this from top down, but it also goes from the bottom up as well.

Kristin MacDonald (13:19.961)

Yeah, you know, it's interesting. Your point and your question kind of bring me to talk about some other work that I'm involved in. So I am a project team member for the Virginia Long-Term Care Clinician Network. And what this is is we refer to it as like a peer learning collaborative. It is a partnership between long-term care clinicians across the Commonwealth.

the Virginia Center on Aging, the School of Medicine, and the Department of Gerontology at Virginia Commonwealth University. And we provide a monthly forum with a clinical education topic every month and also an opportunity for just peer discussion about things that are going on in nursing homes, assisted living, long-term care, congregate care settings across the Commonwealth. We provide a monthly newsletter.

and website with free resources. And our goal is to really connect medical directors, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, practicing in these settings across the Commonwealth. We recognize that practicing in long-term care can kind of be an isolating experience sometimes. And so we are focused on creating connection, which we think is a way to lean into promoting wellbeing.

Jen Yanez Pryor (14:18.189)  
Thank

Kristin MacDonald (14:45.284)  
creating opportunities for compassion, from hearing one another's challenges, commiserating, also offering experience from different perspectives to really continue to bolster the workforce that is caring for a frail population living in long-term care settings across the Commonwealth. And we just finished, submitted a manuscript for review at a journal.

with a wellbeing study that we did, we conducted a survey on burnout and satisfaction with areas of work life for these clinician members and had some really interesting findings as we looked at the trends comparing the nurse practitioner respondents to our physician respondents. So we actually found that nurse practitioners had a lower sense of personal accomplishment and lower satisfaction with areas like

reward community and fairness when compared to physicians. And so I think participating in this network, encouraging clinicians across the state to join this network is another opportunity for us to address long-term care workforce well-being and resilience.

Aging For All (16:01.686)  
think this is modeling the compassion too, knowing that people are heard and knowing that people are understood and knowing that there's something that we can do to support each other within this network. like Jen said earlier, this compassion work extends beyond your initial research or what you saw. This is who you are, it seems. So thank you for sharing about.

the research and I'm eager to read. So please share with us and we maybe can attach it to your blog post when the research is published so others can read.

Kristin MacDonald (16:31.416)

Sure. Yeah, that would be wonderful. And you're absolutely right. mean, I think compassion is something that for, you know, for many of us who have entered helping professions, it is innate to our reasons why we entered. so looking for ways to help one another, to acknowledge that this work is challenging, but also essential moving into the future. You we need to be here for one another and social connectedness is a way to do that.

Jen Yanez Pryor (17:02.305)

Yeah, you know, listening to you describe the model for the Long-Term Care Clinicians Network makes me think of some conversations I've been in, you know, that looks at, you know, administrators, because we know being the administrator, you're at the top of your organization. They often say that's a lonely position. And, you know, they encourage you to connect with your peers across other organizations. And I'm wondering, you know, first of all, I'm wondering,

how can we create a similar model for other types of folks outside of who's included in this project? But thinking about just applying a similar model wherever you are, right? And being kind of that, what do they call it? The champion, right? Being the champion of your discipline or your whatever, or your organization creating that within

Kristin MacDonald (17:52.299)

Sure.

Jen Yanez Pryor (18:00.374)

an organization, especially those multi-chain, know, multi-state chains or whatever could create similar types of programs that would foster that compassion within their company as a whole. It would be really cool.

Kristin MacDonald (18:15.646)

Yeah, it's a really wonderful idea. I'll mention that we have had others outside of just our focus clinician audience join our network and they really do, even though the forums tend to be clinical focused, we have administrators, directors of nursing.

Kristin MacDonald (18:46.359)

how that model could potentially be used for CNAs. I mean, you know, because like I said, I have such a heart for the very direct care workforce, but could we connect CNAs from one organization to another organization across the Commonwealth or beyond just to help them see they're not in this alone. They have a peer network out there. People at other places are facing similar challenges and sometimes just verbally processing that with others can be really helpful.

Aging For All (19:16.674)

Absolutely. And I think about retention. It's important to do this work because as we're aging, as this country's aging, we need compassionate people to be in this space and be retained in this space.

Kristin MacDonald (19:31.542)

Totally, yeah, absolutely. nursing homes specifically are facing staffing mandates. so turnover and retention have always been an issue in this industry, but I think are particularly important right now as they face staffing mandates that will be imposed in 2027, just around the corner. So we have to, this is a paramount issue now.

Jen Yanez Pryor (19:58.114)

Yeah, I will. And I've been thinking about the recruitment and retention issues that, you know, have been there ever present, right? And how for years it seems like the literature tells us the same things over and over and over again. But if we put it in the context of what you're describing as, you know, compassion and well-being, kind of being at the root of something that's going to bring purpose and meaning and fulfillment.

to the people doing the work, then perhaps that should be the root of, you know, one of the mechanisms for fixing this issue. If we look at it in that way, as opposed to some of the other ways that aren't really working to fix this issue.

Kristin MacDonald (20:44.841)

Yeah. And one of the most interesting findings from my research is that the experience of compassionate work affects CNA intentions to stay not necessarily in their current job, but in the field of being a CNA. So, you know, for whatever reason, they may not necessarily have commitment to their current organization, but they feel passionate about remaining in the field. And the effect of that compassion flows through

the effect on meaningfulness of work. And so it's really getting at the root of the values, the purpose, the significance that people are finding in their job. And I think elevating the profession helps highlight that too. We need to really look at CNAs as professionals. And I know that that has historically been a challenge in the industry as well.

Jen Yanez Pryor (21:35.543)

Absolutely.

Aging For All (21:36.226)

So you've done some amazing work. I'm looking forward to reading even more of the research that you've conducted. So through your diverse experiences, what have you learned about aging in general?

Jen Yanez Pryor (21:41.861)

Bye.

Kristin MacDonald (21:50.105)

Aging in general, I think it's important for all of us to embrace aging. I think everyone in healthcare needs to understand that they are working with an aging population, even if people,

students indicate that they have an interest in entering a hospital setting as a professional versus a long-term care setting. They need to understand that because we have a general aging population, they're gonna be working with aging individuals.

And so we all need to have an appreciation for providing healthcare to the aged and then caring for the workforce that also cares for those individuals.

Jen Yanez Pryor (22:31.918)

Yeah, absolutely. I think, you know, I, for the listeners, Kristen already knows this, I also teach some undergraduate students in the management and performance class. And I hear similar things, you know, they don't necessarily connect the dots to, you know, who is in our population of citizens, right? And across the board, you know, we're living longer.

We're experiencing much better health outcomes than before. And so, you know, not just working in these clinical settings, but students who end up going into policy work or research, a lot of the things that's gonna be coming across their desk is gonna be related to how we get to those aspects. How do we make sure that we stay healthy enough to live as long as we can and to contribute.

to society and new in different ways. And so that's been really interesting, I think, in the classroom as well to connect students to those ideas because they're just open and they're not necessarily sure what they're gonna do, but the more options we can give them, the better they'll be, right?

Kristin MacDonald (23:48.052)

Yeah, absolutely.

Aging For All (23:50.428)

Is there anything else you would like to share with our listeners about upcoming projects or anything you would like to share where we're eager to share with our listeners?

Kristin MacDonald (24:00.706)

I I've kind of highlighted the main things that I'm working on. I'll just say too, know, another thought I had is it's always touching to me when I'm working specifically with undergraduate students and someone comes up to me at the end of class and says, like, I work as a CNA at a local facility and how they really seem to brighten with this spotlight that is being shed.

Jen Yanez Pryor (24:10.861)

Thank

Kristin MacDonald (24:25.743)

on their profession in my classroom. And so that's been a really rewarding piece of my work, seeing the connection between research and also being a health professions educator. And so just look forward to more of those connections in my career moving forward.

Aging For All (24:42.05)

So that's awesome. See, the compassion is even spilling out in the classroom.

Jen Yanez Pryor (24:46.958)

Absolutely. I will say too, I think the more we see, know, CNAs as professionals and headlines and articles and spotlights in the public, you know, in positive light, not dripping with those negative things that we often see, especially coming out of the pandemic, you know, I think the more people will start to recognize them as

an essential component of our workforce and a career that can be extremely rewarding. And so I'm really excited to see, you know, all of your research move forward and just see where things end up down the road. Just all good things.

Kristin MacDonald (25:31.586)

Yes. Well, thank you so much for the opportunity to highlight some of my research and my passions here today. It's really been a joy talking with you about them.

Jen Yanez Pryor (25:45.151)

Absolutely. And I want to thank you so much, Kristen, for joining us today. And I want to thank all of our listeners for tuning in.

Aging For All (25:52.362)

And please join us next time for another episode of Aging For All.