

Keywords

aging, dementia, community health, screenings, holistic health, African-American community, cognitive health, healthcare access, Wisdom Watch, brain health

Summary

In this episode of Aging For All, hosts Jen Yanez Pryor and Andrea Price welcome Lisa Brownlee Johnson, a nurse practitioner and geriatrician, to discuss the importance of community engagement in dementia screening and holistic health. Lisa shares her experiences in the healthcare field, emphasizing the need for accessible dementia screenings, building trust within the African-American community, and the role of arts in raising awareness about dementia. The conversation also touches on the significance of partnerships and the mission of Wisdom Watch Alliance to support individuals and families affected by dementia.

Takeaways

Lisa Brownlee Johnson emphasizes the importance of community-based dementia screenings. Building trust in healthcare is essential, especially in marginalized communities. Psychological safety is crucial for discussing cognitive health. Screening tools like the MOCA can provide valuable information but are not definitive diagnoses. Maximizing brain health involves lifestyle choices, not just screenings. The arts can play a significant role in dementia awareness and education. Partnerships are vital for community health initiatives. Wisdom Watch aims to illuminate difficult conversations around aging and dementia. Aging is about embracing wisdom and recognizing the value of each day. Community support systems are essential for navigating dementia care.

Titles

Empowering Communities Through Dementia Awareness
Building Trust in Healthcare for Dementia Screening

Sound bites

"Information is power, knowledge is power."

"We want to feel valued and respected."

"Every day is a gift."

Chapters

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23:16 Reflections on Aging and Wisdom

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:03.554)

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

Aging For All (00:07.926)

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

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:12.13)

Today we are excited to welcome Lisa Brownlee Johnson.

Lisa is a nurse practitioner, geriatrician, and holistic health advocate. She was born and raised in Richmond, Virginia, and is a three-time Virginia Commonwealth University graduate. She is committed to valuing health and well-being at all stages of life. Lisa believes that the most impactful way she could help improve a person's health is to start with the person in the community that the person considers home.

This fueled her passion to help establish Wisdom Watch Alliance, a grassroots volunteer organization devoted to advocating for elders and families living with dementia in Richmond's disproportionately impacted African-American community. A key initiative for Wisdom Watch is to make screenings for dementia more accessible in the community.

Aging For All (01:08.11)

Hello and welcome, Lisa.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (01:10.279)

Hello, hello. Thank you for having me.

Aging For All (01:14.232)

You're welcome. You're welcome, Lisa. You've been in this healthcare field for over 20 years. And so I know you've seen a lot, you've experienced a lot. So tell us a little bit more about what led you to really focus and hone in on community and dementia screening.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (01:32.071)

Well, I tell you, having spent so many years in the setting of primary care, and what we all know is a challenging landscape when it comes to access for primary care, and particularly challenging post-COVID, where many, many people left the primary care arena, I found

myself as a primary care nurse practitioner in geriatrics, seeing more and more individuals and families who were dealing with cognitive changes and waiting, having to wait so long to actually get in, not only with primary care, but also getting in to see specialists. And the

process for screening ended up being so dramatically delayed. And so that really was a spark for me because I really began to feel like we needed to start in places that were more accessible. Yeah, so that's.

Jen Yanez Pryor (02:53.522)

Yeah, you know, I think, well, we know since since the pandemic access to health care has been greatly reduced. And and I think that what you're seeing is important. And and you know, in the intro that I read, it says that you you meet the person where they are at home in the community. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (03:15.313)

Sure, sure. And so this initiative really is informed by what we know are gaps. And so one of the reasons that gaps exist is not only because of access, but because there is sort of a historic tension.

and mistrust when it comes to medical settings, particularly in the African-American community. And so having a psychologically safe space to have this conversation about changes in memory, changes in cognitive function, that really is an important piece.

when it comes to wisdom watch. So not everyone is going to feel comfortable with talking about this subject in a medical office. And so kind of reframing how we approach the conversations so that there is that safety, there is that psychological safety because it can be very vulnerable to talk about.

the types of changes that people may be seeing and really keeping to themselves because of all of the stigma that surrounds that subject of dementia.

Aging For All (04:59.948)

You mentioned some amazing community-based features of this work. You said safety, comfort, removing stigma. This is all about community, in my world at least. And I think I was there for

your very first community event, if I'm not mistaken, at Real Life Ministry. And I was so impressed, first of all,

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (05:20.516)

You are, yes, that is right.

Aging For All (05:29.246)

on how you're able to just talk about dementia in a church setting and you were able to lower maybe some of the tension people might have been feeling. And then they said, let me maybe sign up today to get this screening. So can you talk a little bit of just about the trust? I don't know if you knew the people that were there that day, but for whatever reason, they trusted you that day to say, yes, I will get screened.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (05:54.929)

So thank you for that. I will say this. One of the important messages I believe that came out of that event and that we're carrying forward is that we are explaining what screening is and what screening is not. that screening truly is a tool.

that we have, that we can use before things are advanced and even before someone may be exhibiting outward symptoms. And so some of the principles of screening in healthcare in general have to do with being low risk and high reward. And so,

It doesn't mean that you're being diagnosed with anything. It just means that you're having information that you can use for your wellbeing. We also place a great emphasis on privacy and providing an opportunity to connect with someone if there is that interest, but it is

a respectful connection. So we will not contact individuals or keep a database or anything like that. We will only reach out if that individual who's being screened requests that we do so. And we want to be sure that we are able to allow folks not only to participate in a voluntary way,

but also to have something tangible that they can take with them if they choose to share their information with a trusted loved one or a trusted health provider so that the sharing of that information comes with information about us as Wisdom Watch so that they know, okay, this is the person who screened me, this is where it was.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (08:19.578)

this is that person's credential. So my goal is to be able to give information upon which an individual who is screened can move forward, but not to use that information in any way that may be potentially making a person more vulnerable.

Jen Yanez Pryor (08:46.976)

You mentioned part of the purpose of all this is to bring knowledge, raise awareness. What could you describe? What are these screening tools? What do they consist of? What would that experience be like for someone?

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (09:01.04)

Sure.

Sure. So what we have done from the Wisdom Watch perspective is we have selected a tool called the MOCA, which stands for the Montreal Cognitive Assessment. And it's pretty widely used. One of the reasons that we selected this particular tool is that it very closely correlates with mild cognitive impairment, or MCI.

Now, in our preparation as a group, as a grassroots group to embark upon these community-based screenings, we did do some research and a review of literature in terms of what screening tools are out there. So truth is none of the tools are perfect. And there is simply as

bias in all of the tools in some way. And so we see using this particular tool as simply a resource. And that we wanted to pick one that we could implement in a consistent way. But we also know that there are limitations and that

Just like a single blood pressure reading or a single temperature check is not the definition of a diagnosis, a single Montreal cognitive assessment is not the definitive diagnosis for someone's ongoing cognition. It's simply a piece of information.

Aging For All (10:59.466)

and information is power, knowledge is power, and we know. And Lisa, you know, just navigating, even getting diagnosed is quite a challenge. You alluded to it earlier. So if someone or a family member is helping navigate just getting a diagnosis or you've been diagnosed, what would you tell a family?

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (11:01.337)

Yes.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (11:10.02)

Yeah.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (11:24.934)

So one of the things I say is that everyone has a unique journey. And I had this conversation a few days ago about where you are and finding your tribe, your circle. And you need to be sure that you have the support system that you need to get quality information.

be that medical, but also perhaps social and financial. So knowing who is in your circle of support so that you have your basis covered for the needs that you may have. And that's very general, but I think that's important even prior to any sort of diagnosis.

which is why we are having these conversations through Wisdom Watch is because we as a community, I think we'll be able to support one another in a more effective way. If we can spell out what are the

resources, what are the needs, how do we navigate? I also will say this, as a medical professional and a prescriber, I think it is super important to learn about this process because many are saying in the medical community that we now are in an era of treatment, especially when we're talking about

Alzheimer's, which is only, that's one type of dementia. There are many others. But if we are to be able to be included in treatment, we have to first have definitive diagnosis. And you can't all of a sudden get a diagnosis if there hasn't been sort of a stepwise process of elimination.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (13:50.983)

of other potential reasons for changes in brain function. And so helping our community understand that, I believe is also a great service.

Jen Yanez Pryor (14:09.398)

You've got me thinking about, especially going back to the, well, it's a single screening isn't definitive, right? You got me thinking about the package of things that we can do to just monitor our health in this way, right? Because there's lots of things that they say like, if you're high risk for

hypertension, do these things, right? But if someone has a family history of dementia or if they have other risk factors, the screening is great, but should they come and have themselves screened on a regular basis? Are there other things that you recommend they do as well to help kind of keep an eye on how they're doing?

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (15:04.55)

Sure, I think that's a great question. And so in terms of frequency of screening, I would not prioritize that. What you do want to prioritize is maximizing brain health. And those are things that regardless of whether there's a screening, you still want to do. And I say that for every single one of us. Everybody's brain is the brain.

regardless of whether you are a clinician or, you know, a...

We all have brains and we all will benefit from those steps which are nutrition, control over cardiovascular risk factors like hypertension and cholesterol, quality sleep. There is a correlation between dementia and

Aging For All (16:11.854)

Thanks

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (16:12.006)

chronic insomnia, as is there a correlation between dementia and untreated sleep apnea. There also is great evidence surrounding physical activity and social connectedness. so that social isolation that happened with the pandemic really took a toll for many

of us in terms of cognitive health. So even if there isn't a screening, we all want to take the best possible care of our brains. And that, you know, not to leave out the importance of therapeutic creativity. I think that it's wonderful. One of the folks who is going to be at our event on Saturday, the filmmaker,

Aging For All (16:52.835)

Good.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (17:10.916)

behind the documentary is someone who really champions the creative arts, music, literature, body movement. Those are things that support brain health. And so it's all of those things. Yeah.

Aging For All (17:30.486)

So Lisa, one thing I'm really excited about is not only the screenings that you guys offer, but also how you are integrating social connections, the hosting events, incorporating the arts, which are all good things for the six pillars of brain health we often talk about. So can you tell us a little bit more about the documentary, what the documentary is and why it was important to Wisdom Watch?

to bring this documentary to Richmond.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (18:02.598)

Sure. Well, I'm so excited about the fact that this is going to be shown to a Richmond audience. the title of the documentary is Remember Me, Dementia in the African-American Community. And it really explores this subject from the perspective of the filmmaker. His name is C. Nathaniel Brown. We call him Chuck.

And he actually is a former journalist and author. And he had personal experience in his family with a loved one who at a stage in her dementia journey no longer recognized who he was. And so from that,

lived experience, he began researching what dementia means. Like what is happening to my loved one? Why is this person who helped raise me not even know who I am? And so he has transformed his lived experience into a vehicle to help those who may struggle with having these conversations.

be able to find their voice and to be able to bring those conversations out into the open. Now, the filmmaker also has a Richmond connection from what I understand his grandmother was born here in Richmond. And so when I met him earlier this year, I was very excited about the possibility of continuing.

this effort to just make this conversation easier to have in a way that really values personal strength and dignity, particularly for people of color. Because what we know is that African-Americans are twice as likely to have Alzheimer's. there's a higher

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (20:29.702)

just more disproportionate impact of vascular dementia as well for many reasons. relating this with a creative expression or an artistic expression, I think is really the way to go. I say that as a medical professional who sees this as holistic and that we could all do something.

In a way, yes, this is a crisis. This is a burden. But there can be a transformation of power and healing and love and support as we work together.

Jen Yanez Pryor (21:17.696)

You know, I really love that you really lean into this, you know, kind of creative arts stuff as well, because I think for me, you know, I've seen several different documentaries and speakers who are very engaging walk through the door of my personal experience because it speaks to people in a way that

you know, us as lecturers or practitioners don't quite connect on the same level sometimes and

You know, for some folks, you know who I'm thinking of the people, you know, you speaking in front of the church, right? I'm thinking for some of those folks, they may say, well, you know what she had to say, I've heard before, you know, that's that's fine. But then if they come and watch this documentary, they may say, wow, I get it now. I feel like I know how to tell my story now.

it gives them something personal to latch onto in a way that maybe some of the education we give doesn't quite tap into. And so, you know, it makes me think of the value of not just using our own voice and platform, but creating these partnerships with others to bring them in to tell their side and their experience.

to help us get our message out. so I love this approach and I'm curious about what other partnerships you have that you've tapped into to achieve this goal of bringing in strength and dignity into this process.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (23:01.84)

Sure. Well, I will say this, that it is important to have a sense of belonging. And that is something that I think resonates with all of us. We want to feel like we are seen, we're valued, we're understood. And so there's a mutuality, there's a mutual respect to that. And so that said, the partnerships, we have

we have several sponsors for this upcoming event. And I have approached the sponsorship conversations as let's help one another, you know, because we have to have a mutual and collaborative work. And so we have

in addition to some of our corporate sponsors like RVA Financial and ASI, as well as groups like the Alzheimer's Association and the Virginia Memory Project. We also have charter members of Wisdom Watch Alliance who represent really various arenas, educators, clinicians, social workers.

voices that we want at the table, really all hands on deck, because it is truly, it's a fundamental importance to value what is the irreplaceable human being. No two people are the same, no two brains are the same. And if we can approach this as valuing that,

intrinsic individualism with dignity and respect, then I believe that this will grow and many people will benefit.

Aging For All (25:12.718)

Absolutely. And just kind of to collaborate, since we were talking about community with Jen's question. I think one other powerful thing that I've seen you do in building Wisdom Watch is having conversations. You have approached me and we built a relationship because this matters. Having conversations matter and those conversations have now turned into something that

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (25:18.073)

Mm-hmm.

Jen Yanez Pryor (25:18.242)

Thank

Aging For All (25:42.433)

is necessary for this community. I just want to applaud you first of all for being bold enough to say this is important. I'm going to have these conversations, see who might be interested, let people know why this matters and build from there. So thank you for that. Thanks for just being bold and doing this work.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (26:04.26)

Yeah, well, I appreciate that. And I know that it's bigger than us. It is bigger than us. And it is, it's just.

Aging For All (26:10.114)

Hello. Hello, please.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (26:19.302)

I don't know, just couldn't do anything else. You know, it's one of those things. Yeah, yeah.

Aging For All (26:24.056)

Mm-hmm.

When you have that fire in the house, it's necessary work. You cannot say no when that thing tells you to do this. Or you shouldn't say no.

Jen Yanez Pryor (26:29.996)

Yeah.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (26:36.388)

Yeah. Yep.

Jen Yanez Pryor (26:40.662)

Yeah, absolutely.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (26:41.476)

And it makes it easier, you know, because sometimes people say, well, how do you, how do you find the time? How do you do this? How you, it just happens because there's a compulsion, there's a passion, and there's, there's, there's just, there's a vulnerability to it as well. And what we're doing is we're helping one another to transform what is a challenge into a strength.

Aging For All (26:43.307)

Mm-hmm.

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (27:10.533)

Yeah.

Jen Yanez Pryor (27:14.231)

Is there anything that you want our listeners to know about the work you do that we haven't covered yet?

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (27:23.09)

boy, what an opportunity. So I will just say, as we continue with the wisdom watch mission, our goal is to raise awareness with facts, right? We want high quality information to replace fear. Because the more that you know,

Jen Yanez Pryor (27:24.287)

I'm going

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (27:50.896)

the more that you can sort of disarm what we may be afraid of. And so my hope is that we will have more community events so that we can help illuminate subjects that are very, like that are

broad. Things like medical decision-making and advanced care planning, safety and driving, things that people have a hard time talking about.

So with that, along with creating safe spaces, opportunities for people to have those one-on-one cognitive screenings that they can take with them. So if there are clinicians out there who are interested in being a part of this initiative, I invite you to come to our event, come to our website, and let

us know about you so that we can include you. Because if I had my way, we would have more clinicians who would be able to do these private community-based screenings in a high quality way and in a way that will give those individuals who being screened that information that they can take with them. And so I just see this as something that can grow and that

can really provide a service in a different way as we know that there are still gaps and delays in getting in with specialists. There just are, I think the numbers that the Alzheimer's Association has put out in terms of the workforce, we're not gonna be catching up anytime soon in terms of the number of geriatricians that we need.

So we need to look at this in a different way. The other thing I will say is that I have run into this in my own life where there may be access to clinicians, but those clinicians may not have a comfort level with exploring a person's cognition. And so what we can do around helping to educate

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (30:14.336)

even our colleagues who are professionals, that these are tools that actually, yes, you can make a difference. You don't necessarily have to be a specialist to be able to do a screening in a primary care setting. So helping to provide that information and support that skill set and that confidence, I think is something that I would love to see with some much.

Alliance play a role with.

Aging For All (30:46.126)

Awesome. So Lisa, thank you so much for sharing, being here with us today for the work you are doing, for the work Wisdom Watch is doing. And so before we end today, can you share with us a little bit about what aging means to you?

Lisa Brownlee Johnson (31:02.918)

Oh my, oh goodness. am, I, for me, I feel like aging is...

becoming wise and embracing who you are and overcoming fear and recognizing that every day is a gift. Every day is a gift. I'm in my 50s and I am loving it.

I'm loving it. So, yeah.

Aging For All (31:50.446)

Well, thank you for that.

Jen Yanez Pryor (31:52.098)

Yeah, thank you. Absolutely. Thank you for joining us today and educating us and our listeners about the work that you do and kind of your vision for where you'd like to go. And I want to thank our listeners as always. Thank you for tuning in to another great podcast episode.

Aging For All (32:10.85)

Yes, yes, and thank you, Lisa. Thank you, listeners. And don't forget to subscribe and please share this episode with someone who needs to hear about aging and about wisdom watching, about the wonderful work Lisa is doing. And please join us next time for another amazing episode of Aging for...