Announcer:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap:

To better explore religion’s role in mental health and overall well-being, Missouri State University has created a new interdisciplinary [Undergraduate Certificate in Mental Health and Spirituality](https://www.missouristate.edu/RelSt/MentalHealthSpirituality/default.htm).

This 15-hour program began this fall. It will help students to gain an awareness of the effects of spiritual reflection and practices on mental health and self-understanding. I’m Emily Yeap.

My guests today are [Dr. Stephen Berkwitz](https://search.missouristate.edu/people/stephenberkwitz), department head of [religious studies](https://www.missouristate.edu/relst/) at MSU and [Dr. Amber Abernathy](https://search.missouristate.edu/people/amberabernathy), associate professor of [psychology](https://psychology.missouristate.edu/) at MSU.

They join me to discuss the program and explain the link between mental health and beliefs.

Berkwitz.

Dr. Steven Berkwitz:

From the religious studies side, there are courses that we have developed that directly focus on how religion impacts people’s health, and this can include physical health but a lot of students, I think, are interested in the mental health side. And so, they’ll learn about religious traditions that are related to healing, some kind of mental peace, tranquility, they will also kind of look at how some religious traditions inform what it takes to live well in the world or to achieve a state of well-being.

Emily Yeap:

Abernathy highlights what’s covered on the psychology side.

Dr. Amber Abernathy:

We look at some specific religions, but also religion in general, and so how that is also related to coping behaviors and definitely help the longevity and those types of things. And even beyond that, we talk about physiological responses, so within the body, biological responses one might have because of religion, because of certain experiences and circumstances. Just a wide variety of things.

Emily Yeap:

What kinds of students will benefit from this program?

Dr. Steven Berkwitz:

This certificate program is a way to sort of highlight courses that have a shared interest and a focus on the relationship between mental health and spirituality. And so, it’s a possibility for current students to kind of develop a specialization and gain in knowledge about what it would mean to connect these two areas of human existence. But it also could be beneficial for people who are already pursuing careers in this field to kind of sharpen their skills and earn a certificate as a postbaccalaureate student.

Emily Yeap:

According to Abernathy, this certificate is not only for religion and psychology students.

Dr. Amber Abernathy:

I could see this definitely being beneficial for social work, and nursing, medical fields, counselors, childcare providers, parenting even. Whenever anybody asks, “Where does mental health and spirituality overlap?” it’s going to overlap any time you’re working with people. So, any job where you’re working with somebody else, they’re probably going to have some element of spirituality, some belief form, that can definitely overlap into these areas of mental health.

Emily Yeap:

Berkwitz explains how mental health and spirituality are interconnected.

Dr. Steven Berkwitz:

It's exciting to think about how people’s religious commitments, their values, their spiritual identity, can play such a profound role in how they feel about themselves and how they relate to other people. And so, I think one of the things that I'm excited about this certificate is that we have an opportunity to focus on these questions and help prepare students to deal with these issues in a productive way.

Emily Yeap:

Abernathy believes it’s important to understand how people’s religion and spirituality affects other aspects of their lives.

Dr. Amber Abernathy:

From a psychology standpoint, a lot of our research, or interest, is on what promotes goals for people, meaning for people, again, healthy behaviors, coping, especially from a mental health standpoint which is very huge right now. What can we do to help that? What are the backgrounds causing issues with that? And so, I think that the certificate really can get in some of those aspects that we can look at backgrounds that cause better mental health or cause deficits. We can look at coping behaviors, we can look at meaning of life. So, all of that is definitely going to tie into spirituality, and so the idea is that they can come at this from a psychological perspective as well, but often in our psychology classes we don’t go into the aspects of the religion. So, taking both of those courses together, you’re really going to understand all avenues.

A big push in probably all fields now, especially psychology, is understanding all aspects of an individual. So, holistic medicine and holistic psychology, the mind, spirit, body, how all of this interacts. And so, I think this certificate does a great job of doing just that.

Emily Yeap:

You can find out more about the Undergraduate Certificate in Mental Health and Spirituality at missouristate.edu/relst. I’m Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Narrator:

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.