

# 117 | CerebroFit – with Dr. Vonetta Dotson

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**Speakers:** Vonetta Dotson, Ryan Van Patten, John Bellone



**Intro Music** 00:00



**John Bellone** 00:17

Welcome everyone to Navigating Neuropsychology, a voyage into the depths of the brain and behavior, brought to you by INS. I'm John Bellone.



**Ryan Van Patten** 00:26

And I'm Ryan Van Patten. And we are board certified neuropsychologists. Today we give you a conversation with Dr. Vonetta Dotson on her company CerebroFit. Vonetta is a professor of psychology in gerontology at Georgia State University, Senior Project Scientist at NASA, and founder and president of CerebroFit Integrated Brain

Special thanks to Hunter Holoubek & Shanna Cooper for transcribing this episode.

Health. This episode is different from anything we've released on NavNeuro before, because there's a focus on business aspects of neuropsychology, which John and I both found to be deeply interesting.



**John Bellone** 01:01

We should quickly add the disclaimer that INS neither promotes nor recommends any commercial services described in this episode. So with that, we give you our conversation with Dr. Vonetta Dotson.



**Transition Music** 01:13



**John Bellone** 01:22

Because all of your other responsibilities don't keep you busy enough, you are also the founder and president of CerebroFit, which is a company that, per your website, is committed to providing exceptional clinical, educational, and consultation services to promote brain health and wellness in your clients and in the community. So can you talk about some of the specifics in terms of what CerebroFit does, how and why you started the company, the role of the private sector and brain health? These are different topics that we'd love to talk more about.



**Vonetta Dotson** 01:54

Yes, those are lots of big questions, I'll try to give you a succinct answer. So CerebroFit is a one-stop for brain health, is how I see it. It is my effort at trying to have a more integrated approach for brain health for the community. This all came from me seeing a need and trying to fill it, you know, so after spending years doing neuropsychological assessments, giving my recommendations that almost always included certain, you know, key activities that we all recommend, exercise and social connections, and the sleep and nutrition and all these things. And feeling sort of frustrated that I was always sending people to multiple professionals that you know, they're having to, you know, join the Y or a gym, and then they're going to get a referral to a psychologist for therapy, and then they're trying to see if they can get their doctor to send them to a nutritionist, and all these things are just sort of disjointed, oftentimes, unless maybe you're in a VA. That's one of the few settings where you have so many things in one place. And it just felt like the odds of them flying up seem so much lower when they have to, you know, presumably have all these separate professionals who are trying to address the same issue. And so for years, I said, "Man, I wish there was just one place where I could send people where they can kind of get, maybe not all but most of their brain health needs met." And then eventually I said, "Well, I can't find this place. So why don't I try making it?" And that's where the idea of CerebroFit came. My ultimate goal is to have, actually, a physical center where people can come and get all the services we currently offer done and more. Right now we are, a lot of its virtual, but we do have some things in person. So we started in 2020, January, so <inaudible> timing, it became challenging. We had to switch to virtual, even if we did have the space for it. But, so even though physically it might not be in the same place, it is the same network of people. It is still an integrated approach where we have me doing the neuropsychological assessments and cognitive training.

We have a physical therapist, a fitness manager who does personal I'm sorry, it's a physical therapist, I mean, personal trainer, personal trainer, who does individual and small group personal training sessions and group fitness classes. We have another clinical psychologist who does most therapy even though I do a little bit every now and then we have a dietitian, like you said, who does the nutrition part. We have a health coach. And then the sleep part, actually the therapist normally handles as well, but I am trying to bring on a sleep expert, who, that's all that they would be doing. So that's, that's sort of the goal of having... we make a brain health plan that is within the same group of people. And so like I said, even if some of its virtual and some is in person, it's still integrated In the sense that we're all working together as a team with each person to whatever degree they want to tailor their, their package, if you will. And yeah, it's been challenging, but exciting.



**John Bellone** 05:12

Yeah, I love that idea of having everything kind of in one place. I'm sure it breaks down a lot of the barriers that otherwise people would not follow up on those other services if it wasn't integrated. I could also, I don't know if you've had the experience of people thinking, "Aren't you feeling like it's kind of like a sales pitch, though?" Like, I know, earlier, we talked about how sales is, should be about tying a need with an intervention. But have you had any pushback about that or felt like you were trying to sell the other team members or anything?



**Vonetta Dotson** 05:46

Yeah, that's something I think about a lot. Because I'm thinking, I'm always thinking about my ethical obligation to make sure I'm caring about the patient first, patient or client because honestly, if someone comes in for for personal training, and then we refer them to a nutritionist, they are just a client in the community who's not coming in for a medical issue, but they're actually trying to maintain their wellness, which is part of what we do. We're working on the spectrum. You don't have to have a cognitive problem or need neuropsychological assessment to be one of our clients, because everyone needs to be maintaining their brain health their entire life, regardless of their overall level of health. And so I think about as a... for people who are coming in through the neuropsychological services, and that's their entry into the company, that I'm always mindful of not just trying to send them to everyone to try to make more money, I'm thinking about what do they need. So the goal for me is, for the things that I'm recommending, based on the clinical utility, based on my assessment, I want them to know they have the option of getting this done in an integrated way through the company. But they do also have other options. And some people might think I'm a bad business person for this, but I always give them other options, I will say, we recommend this. This can be done in our company, here's the link to information. Alternatively, this is available in your community; this is available online. I give them all the options. And I'm sure there are some people who say, "Well, man, this is free online, I'm not gonna come to CerebroFit for it," and honestly, that's fine. Because that ethical mission is more important to me. My goal is for them to have, at their disposal, a way of having a healthier brain that is most convenient for them. And sometimes it's not going to be CerebroFit, but if it is helpful for them, then we're there ready to help. So what makes me a good neuropsychologist might make me a bad business person. But ultimately, my, my priority is to take care of my patients.



**John Bellone** 07:44

It probably helps the business though, having you be so transparent. I'd imagine in the long run if your people trust you, and they know you're not just trying to sell them something they don't need. If you're honest about what other resources are on their community, I think that would be a good business decision in the long run.



**Vonetta Dotson** 07:59

That's a good point actually have had someone mentioned that like, "Wow, I'm really impressed that you're giving me these options of... in that district business." And I said, "That's... my goal is to... for you to engage in these healthy behaviors, not, you know, just trying to line our pockets."



**Ryan Van Patten** 08:15

This one-stop-shop for brain health is like a neuropsychologist's dream. I love it. Given your experience so far, is this scalable? Like, could we imagine a world in five or 10 years where there are CerebroFit and/or other companies offering these community-based one-stop-shop centers for brain health?



**Vonetta Dotson** 08:38

I would say yes. I, I really do see this being, I hate saying the future of the field because that sounds really arrogant. I think it's the direction that seems to be hopeful that I think is going to start to be picked up more and more. There are other... because I did all my research before starting this, there are other groups that do a subset of what we do, you know, who might try to have, "Oh, we have neuropsych assessment and we also have nutritionists on board," or "We have exercise and nutrition together or something like that." But I think the scope of what we do is what's really unique. And yeah, so let's think about the model, I think are unique that the research supports being the ideal way of doing it. But the actual organizations doing it is, there's a lag in that. So I think that as this, as the research more and more supports it and as I hopefully keep telling my story, then I think hopefully more people will get inspired and say, "Huh, good idea. Let me see if I can do this in my community." I would love to see this spread. Obviously I'd love for CerebroFit, itself, to spread, but I also just want this type of way of approaching brain health to, to spread, this model roll.



**Ryan Van Patten** 09:49

It's sort of like integrated medicine or interdisciplinary care but broader and outside the walls of the hospital in the community. Yeah, I think it's great.



**Vonetta Dotson** 09:57

Exactly. Yeah. Thank you.



**John Bellone** 10:00

I saw on your website that it's private pay only, that you don't accept insurance. I wanted to talk a little bit about that. And I'm curious what went into the decision, and whether you have enough clients based on on that. Also any concerns that you might only be helping certain members of the population?



**Vonetta Dotson** 10:20

Such wonderful questions. So our plan is not to stay as private pay only that was a practical decision based on wanting to roll out the business and our services. Even if we weren't at the point yet of being on insurance panels... into saying, let's start, start seeing how this works. But that, for me, it is really, really important that we reach the people who need this. And so there's two things that are going to be happening, hopefully, both this year. One is that, it's a bare minimum, that I'll be on Medicare panels, because that's definitely going to, to meet, it's actually even more important than being on particular insurance companies, because Medicare is going to be really reaching people who need it a lot. So that's going to happen and then over time, we'll add more insurance companies. But that's, that's always been the plan. And some plans were slowed down by the pandemic but we're, we're moving forward with that. I think I have it in my second quarter goals, because you know, as a business person you make your goals for, for each quarter, the other thing that we're going to do is we're actually going to be starting a nonprofit arm of CerebroFit. And so that arm is going to be based on trying to have both donations and a percentage of proceeds from the main company that go into providing free services for people who are in need. And so even regardless of the Medicare side, it's saying that we're going into the community, we want to do much more, you know, ranging from things like participation in like health fairs and other events in some of the poor communities in Atlanta, like I said, having a certain number of slots for completely free assessments and services that we can provide. That will be the the goal of the nonprofit. So I actually just, I'm waiting for the paperwork to be signed. So I won't say who but I did actually bring on a clinical associate, a postdoctoral fellow in the field, who's going to be helping with some of those efforts, helping us get the, the nonprofit going and doing some of the community outreach to be able to expand that part of it, because I'm not going to do what I'm doing if I can't reach everybody. So you know, my, my, my, my lab at Georgia State where my day job is, is called the Aging Well for Everyone Lab, which I think encompasses how I approach things. It has to be for everyone, it has to be getting to the people who need it the most, I want the work I do to help to reduce disparities and not perpetuate them by having one group able to access the services and not others. So that can be challenging as a business person, you have to make money to keep business going. But you want to also be able to reach people who need it and so the nonprofit is one way being able to balance that out, that will be a combination of the... more money-making people side, but also the completely lifeless, just out in the community, you don't have to have anything we know we've got your back kind of thing.



**John Bellone** 13:10

Yeah, yeah, I love that. I definitely didn't mean my question to be like a gotcha question or anything.



**Vonetta Dotson** 13:14

Oh, yeah.



**John Bellone** 13:14

This is something that every private practice is gonna have to struggle with. You have to have the business be profitable.



**Vonetta Dotson** 13:20

Yeah.



**John Bellone** 13:20

And there are lots of overhead costs. So if you are not profitable, then you're not gonna be helping anybody in the long run.



**Vonetta Dotson** 13:26

Exactly.



**John Bellone** 13:27

So I completely understand from a business perspective. I like how, you know, you're moving towards increasing the scalability and how many people you will reach. I've also heard, and you mentioned a couple other ideas that I've heard about in talking with people in private practice, like doing some pro bono work, especially once, once you are very profitable, then you might be able to even reach more people. If you just do cases, either for free or on a sliding scale, you can reach people who don't have insurance in that way, in a way that you couldn't reach them if you were just taking insurance. So I do think there, you know, there are ways to do it.



**Vonetta Dotson** 14:05

And we're trying to be creative, too, about that. About, sort of, ways of bringing in money that can help with that. So part of what I do also is I do writing services, writing as in, like, science writing or medical communications, as well as lots of speaking engagements. And so, and that ranges from like in-services for like hospitals, to giving community talks to giving talks, to companies, like major companies who will pay... who can and do pay much more than like a small community a place that, to come and talk about some aspect of brain health to their, to their employees. And that to me feels like a good way of being able to bring funds in for you know, an hour webinar that you know, that a company is paying for, which then provides funds that can go into the community work. So having this broad way of thinking about brain health. That's why, you know, the

description we have, we're just trying to accomplish that we're trying to give educational material as well as like the actual services themselves, as well as resources, really having... thinking outside the box, about how to get brain health to everyone. And it's exciting to keep adding things on. I won't give it all away, but we do have a couple other things planned for the coming year to year and a half that I'm super excited about. One thing I will say cuz it's not private, because I put it on Twitter, is that, um, I'm finally following up on something I... I did a Twitter question last year asking people what topics they would suggest, because we're going to start a YouTube channel where we're going to have brain health minute videos. And so it's going to be, as part of our public engagement effort, that it really will be sort of like, you'll have like a Medical Minute, from different hospitals on, on YouTube that just have a brief, you know, really kind of quick information, little bites of information about medical things. Well, we're going to do this for brain health. And so for all the different services that we provide, all the things that research shows is helpful for brain health. We'll have you know, every other week, a brief video that's coming out that people can get that information quickly. Because apparently, the online information research shows that YouTube is like the second-most searched source of medical information, right behind Google. So that's where people are getting information, we want to be giving them good information that they understand. And that, you know, it's free for them to access, but also could become a way that, if it gets enough traction, you know, you get advertising dollars, that kind of thing. So it's a way of... it can keep on giving in a way that can help the community in multiple ways.



**John Bellone** 16:38

Sounds like you're more ambitious and maybe masochistic than Ryan and me, which I didn't think was possible.



**Vonetta Dotson** 16:45

Yeah, I've been accused as such, out of such, I can acknowledge that's true.



**John Bellone** 16:51

Well, yeah, you're in good company. Did you have enough clients, given how currently it's still cash-pay only?



**Vonetta Dotson** 17:00

So I'm not sure how to answer enough. I will say that we are slowly growing at a reasonable rate that I think for the pandemic, considering the pandemic and considering that this is at this point, a side hustle for me, the goal was never for that to be like my primary income. The goal was to do something... was to provide a service that the community could use, and then to see if I can scale it from there. So I think we've accomplished our initial goal of saying this is something that seems to work, people like it to various degrees, some people just come in for a neuropsych, and then they're done. Some people come in... usually people come in for either neuropsych or the personal training. I have a really fantastic personal trainer who's got an exercise science degree from Georgia State and have a lot of experience working with different medical populations, athletes, just a lot of range of people. And so a lot of times, someone just comes through him or his own connections. And then

that's... when people come in, when I say come in, when people sign up for it service, they get a forum that says, "Hey, this is what we do, we offer these things, and here's why they're important. Are you interested in hearing more about that?" and then that kind of gets sent to me, and then I can then follow up and then give a little spiel about brain health, why it's important regardless of age, regardless of health status, and here are some options for you. Does this sound interesting?" And then they might say no, and I'll say, "Okay, well, in the future, you know, we're here." And some people will just say, "I only want when I came in for." Some will say, "Well, you know what? I had been told that I should see nutritionist, so can I get a package deal with a nutritionist and a personal trainer?" Absolutely. So I sent it to those people. So there's was lots of different ways that it happens. And I think we're getting more and more interest. And that feels really good.



**John Bellone** 18:41

Yeah, maybe I'll just ask one more question. I could go on and on about the business side of things. It's just something I'm interested in. But in terms of marketing strategy, I know you give talks, so that's probably one way that people find you. Other approaches that you've taken that have helped, especially when you were initially starting the company?



**Vonetta Dotson** 19:02

Yeah, a lot started with just word of mouth, because of just in the community, people knowing them and neuropsychologist, it helps, it does help a lot, giving talks. So I can give a workshop for the Georgia Psychological Association. And the people there, there's always a slide at the end of like, "...and I do this, let me know if you're interested," because it's just common sense to do that. But then there's also... we've done a few things to try to engage the community. To kind of engage the community, give information and educational information, but then also get referrals. So, you know, Atlanta, that's where we're based out of, is a huge festival city, and like Fall and Spring, there's any kind of festival you can imagine. It's an artisan festival, it's a all kinds of food festival. Whatever it is, you name it, there's a festival for it. That's a great place for actually having a booth at a festival. And we'll have a table with information. Some of it's just like, "Hey, here's some information about brain health." Some of its like, "Hey, here's what we do." We'll do, like, raffles for a free week of personal training, well not a whole week, like three days of personal training. We'll do things like that to kind of get people interested and coming by and trying to find out more about us. So we do advertisement that way. And then we do have social media presence through Instagram and Facebook. And so five days a week, we put out information, we have a topic each day. So like, there's like Mental Health Monday and Senior Tuesday and Wellness Wednesdays, so like each day is like a topic. And then I will try to find like a news story or other sort of... or blog that has to do with one of the topics that we care about, but that's research-based. And like, it's almost always going to be a lay summary of a research article or something that I always vet it first to make sure that it's, you know, legitimate. But I want it to be something that's going to be, you know, five minute read or less for people who don't have a technical background to learn about something. And so we actually have gotten people responding saying, because sometimes we'll say, let's say it's about depression and the brain, and then we'll say, "You know, if you're feeling depressed, you could come to us here for services, if you're in Georgia," because I'm only licensed in Georgia, or for information about how to find a professional in your area. And so



we'll have that there. And then people can email and get information about the company or I really will spend the time just saying, "Okay, you're in Virginia. Unfortunately, we can't help you there, but here's where you can, like, find out about therapists in your area." So it's a combination of providing information to the public, but then also advertising what we do.



**John Bellone** 21:32

That's great, thanks for talking through all that. We haven't covered the business of neuropsych NavNeuro thus far, and so that was a good little overview of how it can be done really well and tailored towards what we do as neuropsychologists. So thank you.



**Vonetta Dotson** 21:46

My pleasure.



**Exit Music** 21:47



**John Bellone** 21:50

Well, that does it for our conversation with Vonetta. We still have one more Neuropsych Bite with her where we discuss brain health and astronauts based on her work with NASA. We also have upcoming content related to ecological validity and digital assessment. neuropsychiatric symptoms in degenerative diseases, Parkinson's disease, cognition and addiction, neuropsychology and infants and toddlers, and other topics. As always, thanks so much for listening and join us next time as we continue to navigate the brain and behavior. The Navigating Neuropsychology, podcast and all the linked content is intended for general educational purposes only, and does not constitute the practice of psychology or any other professional healthcare advice and services.



**Ryan Van Patten** 22:59

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