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# Social Determinants of Health Part 2: The Unmentionables of Wellness Podcast Transcript

*Crystal Brandow:* Hi, everyone. This is Crystal Brandow with Policy Research Associates. We are back for Social Determinants of Health Part Two, with WELCOA, the Wellness Council of America. If you missed part one, please go back and check it out. We had a great conversation with Ryan Picarella, the president of the Wellness Council of America, about social determinants and how the workplace can stand in the gap of what's available in communities and how social determinants of health impact employees. Today, we're back with Ryan, who again, is the president of WELCOA. He brings great knowledge and insight from a career of over a decade in the health and wellness industry into these conversations that we're having with the Wellness Council of America, which is one of the nation's most respected resources for building healthy workplaces and has been operating for over 30 years. So, we're delighted to be having these conversations on social determinants of health. This is part two of a two-part series on social determinants of health and part two of a four-part series that we're eager and excited to be working on with WELCOA. Ryan, thanks for being back with us.

*Ryan Picarella:* Thanks, Crystal. It's good to be here.

*Crystal Brandow:* Today we're talking about the unmentionables of wellness. Before I even get started with any questions, what does that mean to you right there, the unmentionables of wellness?

*Ryan Picarella:* Yeah. It's a good question. That phrase was coined by a friend of mine, Alexandra Drane, and what we're talking about when it's the unmentionables of wellness, these are the things that most organizations don't want to acknowledge exist with employees, all the things that impact our health. There's some obvious things like cholesterol, and weight, and very specific things that have a correlation to health, but these are the things that we might not be comfortable talking about. These could be mental health issues. These could be financial health issues. These could be relationship issues. These could be struggling taking care of aging parents or children. This could be struggling with a bad sex life. This could be a variety of things that, as humans, that we deal with every single day, but yet are not really comfortable, certainly, bringing to the organization, but at the end of the day, they impact stress and they impact our performance. They can impact our sleep.

*Ryan Picarella:* These things transcend, not just at home, but into the workplace and back and forth, and so all of these things really have a huge, a huge impact on our health. There's a Maslow's hierarchy, if you will. If you can picture in your head, at the very bottom here there's some basic safety and psychological needs that have to be met, and until those are really met, we can't go to the top of the pyramid where it's the self-actualization. I look at this as the broccoli and the treadmill piece, and I'll give you an example.

*Ryan Picarella:* If you are really struggling with putting food on the table, either from a financial perspective or you might live in a food desert, going to the gym is probably the farthest thing away from what's on your mind right now, and that's just not a real part of your world. A lot of times in organizations, we keep pushing step challenges or weight loss challenges, or these kinds of things, and that's just not reasonable for a lot of people. So, the notion of unmentionables is, is that we show up to work as a whole person, even things like what happened in our childhood can have a big impact on our health and well-being.

*Ryan Picarella:* There is a really landmark study called Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs for short, that looked at things that happen many years before we even step into the workplace have an impact on our health, even cardiovascular disease, so things like divorce, incarceration, substance abuse, physical abuse. There's several things that, if they happen to us, as in childhood, and the more of those checkboxes that you check, the more likely you are to have health conditions down the road. Well, that has huge implications for the workplace, and certainly how we begin to help people address some of these health issues. That's the notion here, is that the unmentionables are things that are all inherently important to us that impact our health and wellness, that are things that, typically, we might not feel comfortable or that there might be stigmas around talking about in a work context or environment.

*Crystal Brandow:* Thank you so much. The conversation about social determinants of health, even stemming back to the first podcast that we spoke on, brings up the point of what actually makes us well. We talked a little bit about what some organizations can offer employees in our last recording, and some of the things that you mentioned had to do with bringing in farm-fresh food to work. Things like that, clearly, are related to diet, physical health. So I think what you're describing really helps to expand the sense of determinants of health and look at some of these non-traditional components that, like you said, people are bringing to work with them every day, they're bringing their whole self to work, which includes all these other experiences.

*Ryan Picarella:* Yeah. That's exactly right. What we talked about earlier are related to helping people with some of these physical attributes of health and making sure that they have the right access and all of that. I think this conversation is really about recognizing that there's a lot that comes with being human. It's not easy and it can be messy sometimes. Regardless of what age you are, what color you are, what religion you are, all of these things that we all come in with, just our whole selves, into the office.

We could be getting out of school and dealing with, "Man, now I've got this huge financial debt that I've got to figure out how to manage." I might be getting married and I'm trying to buy a house or I'm looking to retire. All of these things are really what matters to people, and if organizations ignore that those are important things, they're not going to focus on what we think are more the traditional, more physical domain of health attributes.

*Crystal Bradow:* Thank you so much. Part of what people may bring to work with them is the role that they have in their home life, and for a lot of folks, being a caregiver can be part of that. You mentioned the stress of maybe saving money. There are all these different things that people can be stressed about. In some of our wellness work, we've put together some materials specifically for caregivers. That is a huge component of the workforce and something that really is increasingly becoming popular with folks talking about how to take care of caregivers in the workplace who may be coming to work with additional challenges and additional things to navigate, additional stressors every day. So, what do you think is the role of caregiver stress in total wellness?

*Ryan Picarella:* Yeah. Thank you for asking that question because this one, in particular, is incredibly personal to me as well, having a mother that was sick most of my life and needed caregiving, and being a parent of two little ones and having to carry... So, I've seen taking care of children and taking care of parents, and I think this is incredibly powerful. We have the boomers that are retiring, and so taking care of aging parents, understanding and navigating that system, is going to be incredibly important, and also raising our children. Caregivers, as many of you probably know, have one of the highest rates of burnout and turnover of pretty much every job type. So, it's really an incredibly important thing to talk about and to understand and find ways to do it.

*Ryan Picarella:* What's really actually amazing about thinking about caregiving and helping caregivers is that, if you can help alleviate some of the stress and burnout when it comes to caregiving, not only does that improve the caregiver's life and outcomes, but it also improves whoever they're taking care of. There's some really cool research that looked at, in adult communities, that the caregivers there, when they really focused on creating caring and compassionate organizational cultures for these folks, it also improved the life expectancies of the people that they took care of. So that's an incredibly powerful thing, and I think that there's also some cool stuff that... When you even think about taking care of your employees that might be in a caregiving situation, that's going to transcend into taking care of the customer. So, I'm a firm believer that organizations need to put their employees first.

*Ryan Picarella:* It's not putting the customer first, it's putting their employees first, because if you put your employees first, that effort and that work is actually going to translate into taking care of employees as well, too. Caregiver stress is real, it's huge. All of us, at some point in our lives, are probably going to face this, whether it's our own family, it could be a spouse, a sibling, a friend, a grandparent, a parent, any of this, that at some point that this is going to be a very real thing for all of us to deal with. So, I think

an organization has, again, an obligation to create ways and opportunities for them to help their employees. I'll give you one quick example, then I'll let you dive back in. But I actually was doing a podcast this week with an organization, and they give their employees two weeks a year, paid time off, to actually provide caregiving, and that's incredible.

*Ryan Picarella:* I mean, I think this is really a standout organization that's going above and beyond. This doesn't cut into sick time or PTO or any of that. They're just saying, "Look, if you've got... That can be taken intermittently or all at one time, but if you have to take care of someone that's near and dear to you in your life, then you can do that." So, the amount of stress and burden that that alleviates is huge for people. Again, I think really thinking about and helping organizations think through ways to support caregivers is really, in my opinion, one of the most important things they can do.

*Crystal Brandon:* That's wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing that. What a sense of relief for employees that go out and can do that caregiving without having to charge their time off, things that, if they're not sick, they don't need a mental health day, they're not on vacation, and they really just need the time to care for someone, what a wonderful policy to give them the space to do that and alleviate that burden and that stress about charging time off for it.

*Ryan Picarella:* Yeah, absolutely. There's been work stress and home stress, and that's actually not really true, that's a fallacy. There is just stress. What happens at home we'll take to work, what happens at work you take to home. I'm sure everybody can relate with, when you are helping a sick person or someone that needs care and you're thinking about other obligations that you might have with work, that creates a lot of stress. That's a huge, like you said, a huge thing. It can really take a big burden off of employees when they know that they have that support by their company.

*Crystal Brandon:* Yeah, definitely. As far as the role of the organization in helping to support all these different things, from your vantage point and with your experience, how well are organizations doing at addressing these nontraditional determinants of health? What do you think is happening in the field?

*Ryan Picarella:* Well, I think there's a spectrum. I think that the good news, Crystal, is that we're starting to talk about these things, and that's really the first step, I think, for organizations to be successful. Whereas, five years ago, mental health, those types of issues, were shuffled to an EAP and they didn't want to talk about them and just had hoped that their employees would take their personal problems and go deal with them, so that it didn't impact the workplace anymore. That just, frankly, doesn't work. I think there's the spectrum. I think some organizations are really getting upfront in dealing with this, but quite frankly, there is a lot of work that needs to happen and to really start destigmatizing some of these things. The first piece of that, like I said, is to start talking about them.

*Ryan Picarella:* But I think really understanding and connecting employees to whatever resources might already exist is really important, but the traditional, you get three phone calls from an EAP and just talk to them and they'll fix you, doesn't work. So, I'm encouraged, but I think that this is a growing global issue that... I'm starting to see other countries that are starting to look at death-by-overwork rates. It's called karoshi in Japan, as an example. I think that we're starting to see these types of stresses and inequities really begin to boil over, and in some cases end up in death by suicide, which is incredibly tragic. I think that it's certainly on everybody's radar now, and I think that organizations are really starting to rethink their strategies and are really starting to think about how can they address these, but I think that there's still a lot of work that needs to happen. Our country seems to be still experiencing stress, and there's still more tension that's brewing, and so we need to continue to do the hard work to help our communities and our organizations.

*Crystal Brandow:* Thank you so much. That's a wonderful call to action for our listeners to really do this hard work, and if anyone listening to this podcast is not at the level of organizational leadership and maybe thinks that they can't transform the workplace, it's definitely possible to bring these things up to leadership and make the case for it. There are plenty of resources available from WELCOA, as well as from Policy Research Associates, that really highlight the benefits of all these things that Ryan is discussing. So, anyone listening to this could, potentially, take these materials and bring it up to leadership and to decision makers, to try to help transform the workplace environment and create one that is more focused on social determinants of health, including those that are not so traditional, as well as mentally healthy workplaces.

*Ryan Picarella:* Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. I think this is such an important thing, and the last thing I'll say is I think that, everybody, regardless of your title, your position has a responsibility and can do something. It could be as simple as smiling at someone that you walk across or ask how someone's doing or just being grateful for those little things. I think some of those little things can create big ripples and all of that adds up, and you don't know what someone walks into the office with carrying. So whatever kindness or compassion that we can start bringing to each other can make a huge difference, and sometimes you don't even realize the impact that that can have.

*Crystal Brandow:* That's so true. Yeah. Thank you so much for adding that. And thank you for being here with us again. This wraps up Social Determinants of Health Part Two, The Unmentionables of Wellness. We're grateful for your time, Ryan, and look forward to connecting with you when we talk a little bit more about burnout, which you mentioned on today's podcast. We'll talk a little bit more about that in our next conversation.

*Ryan Picarella:* Awesome. Thank you, Crystal.