

New Horizons for Mental Health: Resiliency, Burnout and the Mind- Body Connection Podcast Transcript

Crystal Brandow: Hi everyone. This is Crystal Brandow at Policy Research Associates, and we are back for our third podcast in this four-part series with WELCOA, the Wellness Council of America. They help business and health professionals improve employee wellbeing and help to create healthier organizational cultures.

So, we're back with Ryan Picarella, who is the president of WELCOA. And we're here to hear from him once again and share some information about workplace wellness. And specifically, today, we're going to dive a little bit into the topic of burnout. So, if you didn't listen to our first two podcasts, please feel free to go ahead and check them out. Ryan spoke a little bit about burnout in our social determinants conversation, and we're going to get into that a little bit more today and talk about new horizons for mental health, looking at resiliency, burnout, and the mind-body connection.

So, Ryan, thanks for joining us again.

Ryan Picarella: Thanks for having me, Crystal.

Crystal Brandow: All right. So in these conversations we've been having, we've talked a lot about social determinants of health in the first two podcasts, and I think it would be great to back up a little bit and talk explicitly about mental health and hear from you Ryan, about what you think the latest conversations are about mental health.

For years, stress management was a big part of the conversation for workplace wellness and in conversations about mental health. Do you think that's still commonplace, or how do you see this conversation going today?

Ryan Picarella: I think we're kind of expanding. I mean, I think that stress, we've been talking about stress for years now and it's an important conversation, and we are all continually more stressed out. Every report we get says we're more stressed out now than we were the previous report and continues to be an issue. And I think this is where kind of a lot of these other issues begin to stem from. So, when you're stressed, that sort of translates into poor physical lifestyle choices and behaviors. You're more likely to eat more saturated fats, more likely to not go to the gym. You're more likely to lose sleep and sleep less.

All of these things begin and then all of that, it manifests itself into poor lifestyle choices, and that can become a big issue. And in worst case scenarios, that stress can ultimately

lead to burn out in some cases, even worse. And we're starting to see even rates of suicide, death by suicide rise in an organizational context, which I think is terrifying.

So, I think now, we're expanding the conversation, where now we're starting to see organizations being held responsible for the mental health and wellness of their employees. And so, I think that because of that and other things, organizations are recognizing that this is a big issue. They're making it a strategic priority for them to address and hopefully begin to understand what is the right way to support their employees as they're navigating their own mental health.

And I think the other thing that's really important here too, is that we hear a lot about millennials in the workplace and what they look for in their ideal job, what kind of culture do they want work for within an organization. And the good news is, is that they're demanding to have sort of more purpose and meaning in their work and want to work for an employer that they feel like fills up their bucket when it comes to those types of things. And if they don't have that, that creates stress and ultimately turnover, which organizations certainly don't want more than a healthy amount.

So, I think that it's becoming really one of the most important things that an organization can really do, and I think it should be.

Crystal Brandow: And it has been in the literature for a couple of years now, the value that millennials are putting on work life balance and how that is actually transforming some workspaces and workplaces. So there's really a need for organizations to have an understanding of mental health and resiliency, because it is becoming more commonplace and creating the space and time to take care of oneself is really a demand and an expectation of millennials who are becoming the largest portion of the workplace and will be taking over the global workplace in the future.

So, what do you think organizations do need to understand about mental health and resiliency? So, if the conversations about mental health are shifting, what do organizations need to know to be up to date with this?

Ryan Picarella: I think that the one thing that they need to first begin to understand, is what's creating these issues. And a lot of times, organizations just don't take the time to ask. And so, I think that that's the first step. And at WELCOA, one of the things that we encourage our members to do, I mean, there's some very simple even surveys to begin to understand what are the sort of parts of people's lives that are stressed and that needs to be addressed.

I think another issue is technology, that we are surrounded by technology right now, that most people's phones is everything to them. It's how they interact with family. It's social media. It's how they work. It's their alarm clock. It's how they might even watch entertainment or game or whatever. That we are so plugged in now that there really aren't clear boundaries anymore between work and home life, and that can be a problem.

And so if you're looking at your cell phone or you're reading emails at 9:00 PM at night, and what's the first thing you do when you wake up is probably look at your phone and see if anything caught on fire while you were sleeping that you need to address.

And so, organizations need to help employees understand what are healthy boundaries, when it comes to technology. A friend of mine once said that as fast as things seem to be going right now, they will never be going this slow again. And so I think, in the other kind of flip side of technology too, is that it is creating more issues in organizations with social isolation, that people are kind of hiding behind their keyboard and their computer, and that we're not connecting more as humans. That we as humans, part of what we desire in this experience on earth is to connect with other people.

And honestly, technology can do a lot of great things and things like FaceTime is great if you're traveling to kind of reconnect and have these videos, but there's really no substitute for that. And one of the things that even, this is our year actually, at WELCOA of social connection, is helping organizations understand that first of all, the health impact that happens when you have lack of social connection. And the second part of that is what can you do to sort of increase a more social connection within organizations?

The other thing, last little piece I'll allude to that's kind of interesting, is that when you have an organization that is under large amounts of stress, that it really is like a virus, and companies need to really take that very seriously. And what I mean by that, there was some really cool research that was done, that what they did is they took mothers and their children, and they separated them, and they put them in different rooms. And they would put the mother through kind of artificial sort of anxiety exercises. And then they would reintroduce the child back to their mother. And what happened is, and so that the mother had elevated levels of cortisol, which cortisol is associated with stress, high levels of stress. That child, just by virtue of being around their mother with high amounts of cortisol, also showed higher amounts of cortisol.

And again, I think it's pretty obvious. If you go into a conference room at your office and there was just a tense conversation in the room, and you don't know what it was even about, you can kind of feel that. I mean, as humans, we kind of have this sort of electromagnetic field around us and we can pick up when there are large amounts of stress. And so that begins to spill over and create pretty bad environments for employees.

And so, these are all things that organizations need to begin to understand. And first of all, help management and others, recognizing these are an issue, help them create strategies, coping strategies, resiliency strategies, mindfulness strategies, when these things begin to do happen, that you can sort of reverse that vicious cycle and turn it into more of a virtuous cycle.

Crystal Brandow: Those are all such wonderful points and thank you so much for sharing all of that. And it really leads into what we have set up as the next question, which is the impact of mental health on physical health. So, I think this is increasingly understood. I'm not quite sure if this is universally understood at this point, but there is such a significant impact on physical health caused by mental health. So, can you talk a little bit about that connection for our listeners?

Ryan Picarella: Yeah. I get pretty excited about this, because I think this is just absolutely so fascinating. And so, we're actually going to talk about this. We're going to start at a

very granular level with our DNA. And there is a Nobel Prize winner named Elizabeth Blackburn, that discovered what's called telomeres. And if you think about, a shoelace, the little plastic cap on the end of your shoelace, if you're looking at a DNA strand, that's essentially your telomere.

And so, the connection here is, is that if you are under large amounts of stress, again, have large amounts of cortisol that's rushing through your blood, what they have found is that it actually shortens your telomere. And so, telomeres are something that naturally shortened over time as you age. And I think the greatest and most profound example of this, if you think about a president that goes into the office, a lot of times, four years later after their term, you will see a lot more gray hair. And that is a direct impact of telomeres. When your telomeres shorten and they age, you start seeing effects like gray and other forms of aging that happens. And so that's one very clear and one scientific way that large amounts of stress and burnout can actually impact our health.

What's also and what this gets really fascinating is that they have found that this actually can go from one generation to the next generation. So, if you're not taking care of yourself and you do have shortened telomeres, you're always under stress, that you're not only impacting your physical health, but the results can be seen in your children as well. And I could go off on that really unbelievable and really fascinating stuff.

The other piece, so let's kind of take it up a notch. Cortisol has been pretty much shown to impact every major chronic disease that there is. I mean, we're talking about cardiovascular disease. We're talking about cancer. We're talking about all of these things. And if you have large amounts of cortisol, that if you are stressed a lot, that if you do carry around a lot of mental burden, that that really begins to impact every single area of your life. It is one of the main problems that we see.

If you have high amounts of stress and as I mentioned earlier, you're more likely to eat poorly and not sleep well, all of these things. But even things like decision making are impacted by high amounts of cortisol. That it basically what it does, is it shuts down the front part of your brain and you begin to operate from a fight or flight place and you're not thinking clearly. And what happens is, is that it leads to lack of innovation and creativity.

And this is something that organizations and especially large ones, I mean, spend millions and millions of dollars on, thinking about the giants out there, the 3M's and the Apples and the companies like Tesla that are constantly trying to keep that competitive edge. And creativity and innovation are absolutely so important to these organizations. And if you do have large amounts of stress and cortisol, that those decision-making powers go down. If you're working in a manufacturing environment or you're driving or operating machinery, that if you have large amounts of cortisol, that again, you're much more likely to have an accident than if you're not. And it all makes sense. If you show up to work and you haven't slept very well, you've got a lot of anxiety, the last place your head is at is probably focused on what it should be.

And so, again, this is such an important thing for organizations because as stress continues to rise, it'll ultimately impact the organization's bottom line over time, not to

mention everybody's health in it. And as I alluded to earlier, that this becomes kind of a vicious cycle.

So, stress really, and burnout, permeates every aspect of a person and an organization. And so that's why it is absolutely critical for organizations to help their employees develop skills to deal with this, and also develop an organizational culture that hopefully reduces as much stress as it can, so that it minimizes the problem instead of becomes a breeding ground for stress and anxiety for its employees.

Crystal Brandow: Thank you so much, Ryan. And I also get very excited talking about these topics. So, it was wonderful to listen to you share this information for the audience and I'm going to hold back. So, I also don't dive too far into it and kind of talk about this topic of burnout a little bit.

So, you just mentioned burnout, and this is a topic that's had a lot of attention for a variety of professions, thinking about medical providers, more recently, educators. But burnout can impact everyone in the workplace. Can you talk a little bit more about burnout and how an organization might prevent this from occurring in their employees?

Ryan Picarella: Yeah. So, there's a couple of ways and burn out, as you said, is such a big issue. And I'm glad you mentioned caregivers, teachers, emerging professionals that are helping especially deal with big traumatic events. A friend of mine has an organization and they will go to places where there's either natural disasters or wars and help the frontline people manage their stress, so that they don't get burned out and they can continue to do the good work that they're doing. So, this is incredibly important.

So, I think there's a couple of things that organizations can do from a very basic level. One, they need to teach their employees at the very beginning. And I say, it starts with onboarding. It needs to be part of an organization's kind of strategy, and part of their core mission or vision is to make sure that employees are front and center to their success, and that employees come into a culture that they feel cares for them as a person. That really is one of the most important things, that if people work for a company that they feel like cares for them as a human, it really helps reduce the impact of all of these things. Very basic, doesn't cost anything but incredibly important.

The other piece is to help people learn basic skills. This could be a variety of things. And you know what, everybody's different. So whether you have a mindfulness practice that's important to you, or a meditation practice that's important to you, or that you like yoga, or that you like taking a walk or that you just know how to sort of take yourself out of a stressful situation in management, and that, that becomes again, part of an organizational culture as well. That there might be many and multiple tools available to employees. I've seen quiet rooms before. Just a little bit to sort of take a step back to take a few deep breaths and begin.

So what happens when you begin to either go through a visualization exercise or you take a few moments to really focus on your breath, what it does is it reduces adrenaline immediately, and it also begins to help alleviate large amounts of cortisone, and it basically reestablishes kind of your system and puts you back in check and then allows you to get back to your job.

The other piece that's incredibly important here too, is to build warning signs into management or leadership development training are really for everybody. That if you see a colleague that begins to keep the doors shut or that's not showing up for work, or that begins to isolate themselves, knowing what to do. And so, if you're a leader or management of people, or just a friend of somebody's, that being able to have kind of an early identification system is incredibly important.

So, the making it okay to talk about and say, "Hey, look, I've noticed you doing this. Is there something I can help you with?" Or knowing what resources might exist in the community for people, is incredibly important as well. So, all of these things starting with what are the individual tools that I can use, take advantage of, creating an organizational culture that certainly doesn't allow sort of that viral stress to continue. And then also training and educating really everybody, how do identify warning signs and help someone that they might see as struggling with burnouts or other types of mental health issues.

Crystal Brandow: Wonderful. And I really appreciate you mentioning that the support for employees is everyone's job. So thank you so much for bringing that up, how people in the workplace can be mindful of these changes in their coworkers and just be a support, be around and take notice to these different behaviors that might show that someone is experiencing burnout or having any other challenge, and just being aware of that and mindful of it. So, thank you so much for bringing that up.

Ryan Picarella: Absolutely.

Crystal Brandow: Is there anything else you'd like to mention on today's podcast on resiliency and burnout and the mind-body connection? We've offered a lot of great information to the audience. Thank you so much, and just want to give you a second for any final thoughts.

Ryan Picarella: Yeah. I think that the last thing I'd add that our brain and our bodies are incredibly powerful and they're resilient by nature. And the idea that at a very basic level, that if we just feed our body the right foods and we allow our brain to do its good work, that a lot of times, we do have this amazing, beautiful ability to heal ourselves, but we have to allow it to do that.

So the basics, and I don't want the basics to go on mentioned, because I think just making sure that you do eat a healthy diet is important, that you do make sure that if you're struggling with sleep patterns and not sleeping well, that you begin to take steps to do that. Because when you sleep, that's really your body's time to sort of power down and to go heal and to make sure that everything kind of gets back and check for the next day. Sleep is incredibly, incredibly important, and so I can't state that enough, that making sure that you can recharge really helps create your body to be the most resilient that it can be.

And the next, you know, the, the other piece too, so kind of the third side of this is that the social connection piece that finding time to connect with someone. We are in a world where the gig economy that people might work in a remote place or behind a computer, but I can't understate how important it is for people to have some type of connection with other people. And that doesn't have to necessarily be in the workplace, but it can be. And so, making sure that we do as people, connect with people, that we share experiences,

because that also helps create resiliency. And if there's a time of need, we know that we have a community behind us that might help us.

For some people that might be a church community. For others that might be a family community, a friend, community, any community. But I think that whatever that is, is incredibly important. So, making sure that you feed your body, you allow your body to rest and you build capacity for when times do get tough and they will get tough. That's just part of kind of our experience that we have sort of the right foundation in place, to help us weather any storm that comes our way.

Crystal Brandow: Those are wonderful, practical tips for the audience. Thank you so much for sharing those.

Ryan Picarella: Absolutely. Thank you.

Crystal Brandow: That wraps up today's conversation on resiliency, burnout, and the mind-body connection. Thank you once again to Ryan for talking with us about this very important topic and thank you everyone for listening.