Well@Work Podcast
Episode 16: Mindful Self-Compassion

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMSHA. On this episode of the podcast, Dr. Leslie Anne Ross from the Secondary Traumatic Stress Innovations and Solutions Center discusses mindful self-compassion.

Hello, my name is Dr. Leslie Anne Ross, I'm a psychologist and a member of the Secondary Traumatic Stress Innovations and Solutions Center at the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. Today I would like to demonstrate for you mindful self-compassion. This is a specific strategy that you can use to help manage life stressors, increase your sense of well-being, and improve your confidence in sustaining the quality of your work.

We all know that empathy and compassion are critical to providing good care to our patients and our clients. Many providers share stories of how their desire to give back to their community and support others motivated their pursuits into the helping professions in the first place. In fact, some studies show that the experience of success and helpfulness and making a difference bolsters our sense of mastery and confidence, as well as well-being. It also helps create a sense of community and connection, which is more elusive during this time of social separation. However, research also suggests that as experiences of secondary traumatic stress or burnout increase, a more positive sense of self may fall away and feelings of fear, anxiety, post-traumatic stress and depression can take their place. The rewards that stem from providing good care can be shaken when you're unable to perform at your best. Self-doubt and the associated self-criticism can add to this distress. Dr. Kristin Neff, a leader in the field of mindful self-compassion, says that self-esteem is bolstered when we're doing our job well. Studies have shown that these feelings of self-confidence, however, can be contingent on our perception and interpretation of success. So, what happens when we fail? What happens if our best efforts feel like they're not enough? During these challenging times, our internal evaluation of self-worth can be shaken, leading to harsh self-talk and self-criticism. This internal dialogue is often completely out of our awareness and its harmful effects can go unchecked. Dr. Neff's research indicates that this kind of self-criticism can be experienced by the nervous system as perceived threat and our bodies can respond accordingly, adding to the stress response of the real threat in a trauma-exposed environment. This toxic stress increases the emotional and physical toll of negative self-talk.

Here's a tip to get you started, practice a mindfulness self-compassion exercise aimed at changing this critical self-talk. If you are experiencing multiple types of stressors over an extended period of time with little capacity to take a break both emotionally and physically, you may feel like you're losing confidence in your ability to do your best work. Mindful self-compassion is a strategy that can help you manage. Try this: this exercise should be done over several weeks and will eventually form the blueprint for changing how you relate to yourself long term. Number one: the first step towards changing the way you treat yourself is to notice when you're being self-critical. It may be that like many of us your self-critical voice is so common for you that you don't even notice when it's present. Whenever you're feeling bad about something, think about what you've just said to yourself. Try to be as accurate as possible noting your inner speech verbatim. What words do you actually use when you're self-critical? Are there key phrases that come up over and over again? What's the tone of your voice? Is

it harsh, angry, cold? Does the voice remind you of anyone in your past who is critical of you? Really try to get a clear sense of how you talk to yourself.

Number two: make an active effort to soften the self-critical voice but do so with compassion rather than self-judgment. For instance, don't say to your inner critic “You're mean and harmful,” use kinder words. Something like, “I know you're worried about me and feel unsafe, but you are causing me unnecessary pain. Could you let my inner compassionate self say a few words?” Now reframe the observations made by your inner critic in a friendly, positive way. If you're having trouble thinking of what words to use, you might want to imagine what a very compassionate friend would say to you in this situation. It might help to use a term of endearment that strengthens expressed feelings of warmth and care, but only if it feels natural, rather than forced. While engaging in the supportive self-talk, you might want to try gently placing your hand on your heart or holding your face tenderly in your hands, as long as no one is looking. Physical gestures of warmth can tap into the caregiving system, even if you're having trouble calling up emotions of kindness at first, releasing oxytocin that will help change your biochemistry. Practice this exercise until it stops feeling awkward. And remember, the important thing is that you start acting kindly. And feelings of true warmth and caring will eventually follow. For more information, please check out Kristin Neff's webpage with other free self-compassion exercises, as well as our own library of resources. Both links can be found in the description of this podcast. And remember, as always, stay well at work. Thank you and take care.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website, and of course stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.