Well@Work Podcast
Episode 6: Healthy Peer Networks

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is being brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode of the podcast, Cambria Rose Walsh, a licensed clinical social worker, discusses how forming healthy peer networks can help combat secondary traumatic stress. And now, Cambria Rose Walsh.

Hello, my name is Cambria Rose Walsh, and I'm a licensed clinical social worker who specializes in trauma-informed care, system change, and secondary traumatic stress. This podcast focuses on developing healthy peer networks. As Dr. Sprang introduced in the first podcast in this series, secondary traumatic stress, or STS, is an occupational hazard that impacts many professionals working with individuals who've experienced trauma. Professionals who are exposed to trauma in their work may experience a wide range of symptoms and reactions ranging from mild to severe, in which case, they may even develop post-traumatic stress disorder. As you heard in the podcast that Allison Hendricks did on the role of supervisors, we know that these leaders play a key part in mitigating STS. In addition to supervisors, it is important to form strong peer networks at work or with those related to your profession. While supervisors may play a role in setting up and supporting peer networks, which can be a real positive, these networks may actually play an even more important role in situations where supervision is not readily available or is not meeting your needs.

Take for instance Taylor, they are in their first job out of graduate school and working with children who have experienced child sexual abuse. Taylor's supervisor provides excellent administrative supervision and has really helped Taylor learn about the policies and procedures related to the job. However, this supervisor does not provide the time or the space for Taylor to process reactions to the work. Taylor works with a team of very seasoned professionals and has found that several of their colleagues are great mentors and provide a space for Taylor to process some of their concerns. As a provider who is non-binary and biracial, Taylor has found that having a safe space to process feelings and reactions both to trauma, as well as challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, has been incredibly important. So, what are some important tips to keep in mind about peer support, and how do you form effective peer networks?

Tip 1: know what makes good peer support. It is important to keep in mind that not all peers make good supportive allies all of the time. For peer support to be effective, one must feel a sense of safety and trust with one's peers. If someone is not willing to process or address their STS in ways that are healthy, then they may not be in a place to provide or accept support. Similarly, if someone is burned out, they may not be able to be fully present in a mutually supportive manner.

In the nursing profession, there's a saying that nurses "Eat their young." This refers to the more veteran nurses bullying or not being supportive of the newer nurses. If this type of dynamic is in place, then it is clearly not going to create a supportive environment in which to get peer support and actually creates a larger work environment challenge that needs to be addressed. For Taylor, they realized that some of their co-workers were not interested or able to take the time to be supportive and one co-worker in particular showed some hostility. Taylor was able to join up with three co-workers who had formed a peer support group. More on what they did that made them realize that this was an effective peer network later in the podcast.

Tip number two: understand the bounds of peer support. There are times that peer support may not meet your needs because your level of STS needs additional support beyond what can be expected from your peers. A positive peer network will be one in which the members are able to assess for themselves and be honest with their peers when more than peer support is needed. For Taylor, when there was an instance of violence against an African-American in their community, it became clear that more than peer support was needed to address the fear and mistrust this was bringing up. Taylor was thankful that their peer was honest that it felt like Taylor needed more support than the peer group could give, but continued to welcome Taylor to participate in their peer support activities.

Tip 3: have a clear process for forming networks and setting clear expectations and developing trust. There needs to be a process for forming networks. How formal will the peer network be? Will they be supported by the organization? Meet regularly for specific activities? Or is it just reaching out to the peers needed for informal check-ins? Or having an accountability partner or partners? More on these different types in a moment. Can anyone join at any time? Is there a limit on how many people are part of the peer network? As the network is formed, it is important that clear expectations are set up so that all members understand the purpose and boundaries of the network. Just as in the example with Taylor, it is important that clear expectations are communicated when peer networks form and when challenges arise. Having those expectations clear at the beginning and having a sense of safety and trust between the peers, made it easier for their peers to point out Taylor might need further support.

Tip 4: utilize lessons learned from existing models to get started. Peer networks may be embedded as part of a group supervision or peer group that meets regularly. Sometimes this is part of the organizational culture and supported by the supervisor or organization to set aside time for these activities. Examples of these include Schwartz rounds and Balint Groups which have been developed and utilized within health care settings. Informal check-ins may be something that you do with peers as needed and are not necessarily scheduled. Remember, when sharing experiences with a peer, make sure you are not sliming them with graphic trauma unnecessarily. Describe the feelings and thoughts, not the details. There is a framework for doing this that is called low impact processing, or debriefing. Another method for informal support is having an accountability partner. This is having one or more people who help keep you on track. Together with your partners, you can determine what activities will be most helpful. This can include taking a walk or engaging in mindfulness activities together, prompting one another to do a self-check-in, like using a feeling thermometer or other self-monitoring tool. Taylor's peer network was meeting once a week for a morning walk at a time that none of them schedule clients. During this walk, each person checked in about how they were doing, and shared a success story from the past week. Each week, one of the peers also shared a strategy that they had engaged in that helped them either practice mindfulness or that developed their professional sense of competence. The peer group had set clear expectations for participation.

These are just some examples of how peer support can be implemented. For more information, check out the resources at our website and in the description of the video. And remember, to stay well at work. 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.