**Well@Work Podcast**

**Season 3, Episode 1:**

**Working in the Midst of Workforce Shortages**

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 SAMHSA through the Kentucky Department of Behavioral Health to the Center on Trauma and Children. On this episode, Emily Smith outlines some strategies to reduce the stress of working in the midst of workforce shortages.

Hi, I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. Recent media reports on the state of the American workforce remind us that what happens at work impacts our personal lives and vice versa. Which makes sense, when you realize that U.S workers log 90,000 hours, or about a third of our lives, on the job. Current challenges with staffing mean many workers have been asked to take on extra responsibilities, to work overtime, or to pick up extra job duties. As a result, workers are feeling added work stress. Recent data from the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics found that nearly 30% of health care and social services workers quit their jobs in 2021 and other surveys found that one in five health care workers plan to quit in 2022. In this podcast, I'll share some steps that you can take to deal with the stresses of working in the midst of a workforce shortage.

First, let's consider a scenario that may be all too familiar to you. John is a nurse practitioner at a long-term care facility, a job he's had for 12 years. In the first year of COVID, there were high emotional and physical costs to both staff and residents. Over time, the facility lost more residents and staff to COVID, other staff members moved to new jobs, and some even left health care. John says “Who can blame them? Year one of COVID was exhausting, year two was even more exhausting, and now the work just feels endless.” For several years John has worked with the same people every shift, but his established team dissolved under the extreme pressure and COVID losses. Although the facility hires replacements for lost staff, most shifts are short a person or two. Many of his new colleagues are recent graduates of a local program and John worries that they will make mistakes that cause injury to the residents. A few of his colleagues seem checked out. John finds himself doing more work than usual to make up for it, often expected to stay after his shift or pick up overtime. He doesn't want to leave the care facility, but John is stressed and worries that things will get worse before they get better. Here are some strategies that John can use to reduce his stress.

Tip 1: build stronger relationships. Social support offered by colleagues can sustain you on challenging days, boosting your mood and increasing your job satisfaction. Strong work relationships can build trust and help teams become more resilient to workplace stress. A buddy system, teaming a new hire with an established staff member, can ensure that new staff learn needed skills, integrate into the team, all while fostering a strong team culture. Peer mentors can also help new team members become proficient in job duties, particularly important in specialized jobs. A strong support network at work can also be personally satisfying, enhancing self-esteem, promoting mental health, and improving motivation.

Tip 2: be a great communicator. Clearly defined roles and shared goals can make it easier to work as a cohesive team; they are also a key component of psychological safety. Strong clear communication can reduce conflict, improve client care, and help to encourage a healthy workplace. Supervisors who hold a pre-shift huddle make time for staff members to share critical information that may not be included in charts or reports, they also allow for staff collaboration through innovative problem solving. If you have a concern, communicate this to supervisors or colleagues that are in a position to address the matter. Make sure to communicate clearly, without too much emotion, so your message does not get lost.

Tip 3: take control of your well-being. Organizations are investing more resources in worker mental health and, by some estimates, the return is four times the investment. This means that most organizations offer resources and enhanced mental health benefits, so take advantage of them; it's not possible to invest in others if you don't invest in yourself. The time you spend taking care of your mental health and well-being can have lasting results. Research continues to show that caring for your mental health may reduce work stress, build resilience, increase your energy levels, and improve your physical health. Self-compassion, meditation, exercise, or time with friends can all contribute to positive mental health.

Tip 4: reconnect with your purpose. What is it about this job that helps you fulfill your purpose in life? Remember a time when you received a compliment from a co-worker or a patient. Retell the story of when you felt like you made a positive difference in someone's life. How did that feel? How can you do more of that?

Tip 5: mark the end of your work day. Do a shutdown ritual at the end of each shift: review your accomplishments for the day, tidy your desk, write tomorrow's to-do list, finish out the day saying something like “shut down complete.” It may sound silly, but it can help define the end of your day and mark the beginning of your non-work life. When not at work, unplug and be present in your personal life. Make time for activities you enjoy, rest, exercise, and enjoy your time away from work.

Taking these steps can help you become more resilient to the stresses of working in the midst of a workforce shortage and can keep you Well@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@Work.