Well@Work Podcast
Season 3, Episode 3:
Increasing Psychological Safety in the Workplace

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 gives some tips to improve the psychological safety of your work environment.

Hi, I'm Emily Smith with the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. Research indicates that when staff feel comfortable speaking up and are empowered to take action, teams are more likely to be high performing. A 2015 study of successful teams at Google found that how teams interact can impact their performance; that means you can build the perfect team on paper, but the way that individuals work together may be even more important than who is on the team. Across disciplines, psychological safety leads to higher performance and greater job satisfaction. In the high stakes environment of health and behavioral health care, psychological safety can lead to better patient outcomes, better care, and greater well-being for workers. In this podcast I'll share some ways that you can improve the psychological safety of your work environment, benefiting you, your colleagues, and those in your care.

Psychological safety is a social concept. Groups are guided by social norms, which define the correct way to behave, perform tasks, or respond to experiences. When social norms encourage team cohesion, promote positive and supportive behavior, and provide growth opportunities through learning and skill building, the high level of psychological safety fosters a healthy work environment. But the opposite can also be true. Psychological safety can be compromised by organizational culture where bullying or harassment from colleagues, clients, or patients is tolerated or even perpetuated by organizational leaders. Leaders play a critical role in psychological safety. By promoting behaviors that create a healthy work environment, leaders can reduce the impact of racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic policies or behaviors that lead individuals to feel psychologically unsafe. Healthy interpersonal relationships among colleagues also play a part. Peer support from your colleagues can encourage you to take more risks, be a more creative problem solver, and grow both professionally and personally.

Let's consider the recent experiences of Brianna, who is a nurse. Brianna started her career at a local hospital during the pandemic, joining a team where the supervisor played favorites, discouraged asking questions or voicing concerns, and pushed policies that seemed unsafe. Brianna requested a department change and was transferred. Her new team works well together and welcomed Brianna, especially the supervisor. The team clearly trusts and likes working with one another, something she thought was missing from

her last team. Brianna's supervisor always welcomes questions and concerns, so Brianna asked how she can contribute more positively to the group. Here are some of the tips Brianna's supervisor shared.

Tip 1: become trauma informed. Trauma informed supervision and organizational culture acknowledges the inherent risk that comes from providing care to patients or clients experiencing trauma and offers support to enable workers to recover from these experiences. Psychologically safe organizations also support workers who may be impacted by hearing details of trauma in their work, reducing the risk of developing secondary traumatic stress. Supervisors in psychologically safe workplaces encourage staff to talk about these challenges in healthy ways and offer services that prevent and mitigate the impact of STS.

Tip 2: assess your psychological safety risks. Healthy working relationships are built on trust, clear communication, and role clarity. Consider whether your relationships with others are balanced. Can you rely on others to effectively do their duties in a timely manner? Can others rely on you? Are relationships with your supervisor and colleagues supportive? Do they help you accomplish tasks and reach goals? Do you do the same for them?

Tip 3: be self-aware. Stress can be high when care needs are high, how do you behave in these situations? Learn to regulate your emotions and express your needs without reacting negatively to the stress or difficulties. Acknowledge your role in relationships, be a good team member by supporting others, be reliable and timely, learn and teach new skills, ask for and accept help. Be open to listening to others and willing to share, but be mindful about sharing graphic trauma stories, learn to share necessary details without sliming others.

Tip 4: make room for constructive, respectful debate. Be open and honest about your concerns, attack the problem not your colleagues. Voicing your concerns over a treatment plan can lead to better patient outcomes. When differences or disagreements about client care come up, discuss things in a way that encourages and fosters growth. When you disagree with a co-worker, maintain an open dialogue, listen to their take on the situation, and offer them evidence to challenge their view. Remember that innovations come from new ideas, so be open to new perspectives when solving problems.

Tip 5: be courageous. Psychological safety doesn't mean that it's easy to disagree or to share new ideas, we all doubt ourselves or worry about how others will perceive our contributions. Do not assume the worst of others, trust in them and take a risk; you'll be modeling to others what a safe environment looks like with your inputs and how you respond to them. You cannot feel completely safe if you never test the waters.

Tip 6: make sure you are a safe member of the team. Value others regardless of their differences to you. Be fair and equitable, acknowledge the importance of others roles, and let them know you value their contributions. Foster a collective group identity by using inclusive words like "we" and "us." Support colleagues by letting them know they can speak

up freely with you, without worrying that you will embarrass or reject them about their ideas.

Using these tips can help you improve your work environment and make work more enjoyable, which 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.