

COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKER SERIES

SESSION 3: RESILIENCE STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

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Dany Zimmel (DZ): Welcome to Ideas for Practice, a podcast of the Region V Public Health Training Center. As one of the 10 PHTCs across the country, the Region V PHTC aims to strengthen the skills of the current and future public health workforce in order to improve population health outcomes. We hope this podcast will share insights and spark ideas among those working in public health practice. Thank you for tuning into our episode. Today we'll be talking all about resilient strategies for community health workers, or CHWs. I'm your host, Dany Zimmel. In this episode on CHWs, we'll be hearing all about the importance of addressing mental health challenges for professional and personal well-being, and we'll also dig into some ways that CHWs can incorporate resilient strategies into their own practice. Our guest today is Porsche Fischer, education and registry manager at the Michigan Community Health Worker Alliance, or MiCHWA. Porsche has advanced degrees in Sociology and Criminal Justice and is currently conducting doctoral research work on a project helping underserved communities bridge the digital divide in addition to the work that she does at MiCHWA. Welcome to the podcast, Porsche, I'm excited to speak with you today.

Porsche Fischer (PF): Hi, Dany, thank you so much for having me.

DZ: Great. Okay, Porsche, so to get started, here's our first question. What are some of the prominent mental health issues faced by community health workers and public health professionals today?

PF: Well, in light of the pandemic, as with many people in the world today, CHWs and other health professionals are under a lot of extra stress and anxiety when dealing with the additional challenges of living in these unprecedented times. Prior to the pandemic, community health workers face similar mental health issues as other public health professionals, the most prominent being burn out from the strain of their positions or from the combination of a potentially stressful position in addition to the demands of the second shift that begins the moment we leave our place of employment and start to work on our personal responsibilities. We all have a lot going on and health workers tend to wanna help take care of others so that tendency can take a toll on someone who's already juggling a stressful job on top of a home life and house work, plus taking care of children, parents, other family members, grocery shopping, plus financial obligations, school work, and a variety of other responsibilities. Because any of these things can become potential stressors if not managed properly, and many CHWs are dealing with multiple issues at once.

DZ: Wow, yes, this is definitely true. And we need to be thinking about this and mentioning this more often, being upfront about the compounding challenges and priorities that people have to face. Next, I'd like to ask, what are some mental health challenges that CHWs have faced in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic?

PF: Well, for CHWs, they really wanna help others, that's the foundation of what they do. So they often put the needs of others before their own. It's like the parent who wants to put

the oxygen mask on their children before they put on their own, we all know what can happen to the parent in this scenario, right?

DZ: Right. *[chuckle]*

PF: If you aren't taking care of yourself first, your health can suffer so that you aren't able to take care of others at all. So one of the biggest challenges for CHWs during COVID was that they were laid off, furloughed or let go from their jobs, which took away their ability to help, and that can lead to a feeling of total helplessness. If you combine feelings of helplessness in addition to dealing with the strain of the financial problems that can result from a loss of employment and then add anxiety and fear about the virus itself and the unknown aspects of the virus, and then also add the grief that comes with the loss of loved ones and community members, you can see how all of these factors can create very real and legitimate mental health issues. If these issues aren't dealt with, they can be overwhelming and lead to hopelessness, depression, or even thoughts of apathy or self-harm. And this isn't limited to those who lost their jobs, many CHWs who are fortunate enough to not lose their jobs, were still experiencing many of these other issues I mentioned, and also watching others who did lose their jobs or loved ones deal with tragic grief and loss.

DZ: Yeah, that's definitely important to keep in mind and it really has been a long time since this all started in March of 2020, it's important to remember that we're not out of the woods and this prolonged pandemic is still having an impact on the mental health of our public health workforce, especially our community health workers that are working on the front lines, integrated with communities.

PF: Right.

DZ: Next, I'd like to ask about what are some ways that you or organization, MiCHWA have worked to help alleviate some of these issues?

PF: Okay, well, last year at MiCHWA, we were really proactive in starting a wellness plan for CHWs, it would include a series of continuing education webinars to introduce yoga and mindfulness in a very accessible way. The first was yoga 101, and then we went on to yoga 102. And finally, a webinar called Yoga for Stress Relief. All of our videos are available on-demand and totally free of charge on our YouTube channel, if you visit it online. If you smash a subscribe button on our channel or follow us on Eventbrite, you'll also be notified of any new continuing education opportunities as they are released. We also added a self-care session to our monthly CHW advisory network group meeting that is open for all MiCHWA, CHWs to join. At the beginning of every meeting, we invite the CHWs to sit down, close their eyes if they can, and relax while we do wellness exercises that are seen to the month, the season, or another relevant topic that is chosen to help CHWs incorporate self-care into their own lives and also in the lives of those around them.

DZ: This sounds so great. You're educating CHWs about the importance of self-care, you're showing them ways that they can practice some of these strategies, but you're also

allowing them to actually practice these strategies during the meetings, I think that's really an incredible approach.

PF: It has been.

DZ: Yeah. So, now getting down to things at the individual level, we know that there are things that someone can do on their own, but why is it important for CHWs to incorporate some of these self-care strategies into their busy schedules?

PF: Well, it's so important for all of us to embrace self-care opportunities, right? But especially important for CHWs and people who need to take care of other people. I like to tell CHWs that their energy level is like a cell phone battery, you usually start the day with a full battery, and then every time you do something to help someone else, it drains your battery a little bit and not necessarily in a bad way. Although it is true, that some people in situations drain you more than others, but that's a topic for another podcast. [chuckle] Sometimes if you were up late or didn't sleep well, for whatever reason, you start the day with less than a full battery. Self-care and mindfulness techniques and strategies teach you the ability to slow down and become more aware. This self-awareness is not just what you are doing and how, but why you do the things that you do.

DZ: Okay, so, Porsche, I'm going to interrupt you for a moment. Can you please go back and repeat those last couple of sentences. I think they're really important for us to emphasize.

PF: Absolutely, and I agree. Self-care and mindfulness techniques and strategies teach you the ability to slow down and become more aware. This self-awareness is not just of what you are doing and how, but why you do the things that you do. A lot of the things that we do that drain our energy are out of habit, and we don't even realize that we're doing them. Sometimes we drain our energy resisting change or worrying about things we can't change or have no control over. So, mindfulness also teaches you to have acceptance without feeling the need to react or overreact out of habit. It's a lot to think about, but slowing down and taking a couple of moments for yourself to do something as simple as a few breathing exercises really allows you to charge your energy back up so that you are better prepared to take care of everything and everyone else. You can't keep taking care of everything else and do the best job you want to when you have a low battery or even worse, a dead battery. We never want our CHWs to get to the point where all of their energy is drained and then they get burnout.

DZ: This is definitely a really important point. We certainly don't want our CHWs to get burned out. So, this leads to my next question, what are some resilient strategies that community health workers can utilize to enhance their daily practice?

PF: Well, resilience is essential for CHWs, because the work they do in the community is so challenging. CHWs often deal with people who are dealing with chronic diseases and other medical, mental health and financial issues, which isn't easy. Strengthening your ability to accept the situations in your life and career and to breathe through them without reacting

is such a valuable skill that CHWs can use to increase their resilience and even help others to do the same. Many will find that after they breathe through a challenging situation, their emotions are just not as intense, and sometimes if we give ourselves a little time and space to process our emotions, we are able to respond appropriately instead of reacting or overreacting out of habit. Sometimes, and this is the true goal and benefit of yoga, we might decide that the best reaction is no reaction at all.

DZ: I really like that. I also like the point about creating time and space for you to be able to process things. So, this kinda leads me to the next request for you actually. Could you please describe a self-care strategy that you recommend community health workers incorporate into their practice?

PF: Absolutely. I totally recommend using a simple calming breathing technique called a cleansing breath. It can be as long or as short as you need, and it's something that could be done almost anywhere. It's also very easy for CHWs to share with others.

DZ: That sounds like a really helpful strategy. I will definitely have to try that one. Is there another one that you know that has been helpful for CHWs to use, maybe when they're feeling overwhelmed, stressed or anxious?

PF: Sure. Using a mantra or an intention while you do a breathing exercise is a great way to deal with stress or anxiety. This intention can be as easy as saying something like, I am letting go of my fear of whatever it is on the exhale, of the breathing exercise, and something like, I am breathing in a chance to leave my fear of blank behind on the inhale, or I am breathing in a brand new moment or a brand new day, on the inhale or I am brave, strong, powerful, whatever it is that you need in that moment. So you can see how this strategy can be customized to fit just about any situation.

DZ: I really like this. It sounds like these mantras coupled with breathing exercises is something really helpful to have in your back pocket. I especially like the, I'm breathing in a brand new moment, I think I'm going to start using that. So Porsche, I think it would be helpful for our listeners if you could walk us through a guided breathing exercise, perhaps that cleansing breath that you just described. How does that sound?

PF: Well, Dany, I would love to do that. [chuckle] So, a breathing exercise is one of the best ways to give CHWs a tool that they can use not only for themselves, but one that is really easy to share with others, whether it's a client, a friend, a co-worker, or even a family member. Today I'd like to share a cleansing breath exercise, because it's actually one of my favorites to do myself and also to share.

DZ: Great.

PF: So today we're gonna get started by explaining what the cleansing breath is. So, not complicated at all, a cleansing breath is simply an inhale through the nose and an exhale through the mouth. The longer the inhale and the exhale, the more calming benefits you'll receive to your nervous system. So today, I'd like you to begin seated with your legs

un-crossed and your feet flat on the floor if you can. So your knees, ankles and feet should be about six or eight inches apart, or about two fist distance, if you'd like to measure. So if that helps you, go ahead and make two fists and put them between your knees and then your feet flat on the floor. Next, we want you to focus on your posture, by sitting up straight and lengthening your spine. Start by rooting down into your seat as you extend up towards the spine and out through the crown of the head in one long line. Squeeze your shoulders up towards your ears, and then release them back down and away from your ears as you spread your shoulder blades like angel wings behind you.

PF: Now tuck your tailbone under slightly, engage the belly as you pull it in just a bit, and then tuck your chin under very slightly, so you can feel the back of your neck lengthening. Now that your posture is strong, we'll begin the breathing exercise by inhaling for a count of three, and then exhaling for the same amount. Now remember, the inhales will be in through the nose and the exhales will be out through the mouth. After we do the first three rounds of cleansing breath for a count of three, we're going to do the same exercise again, making the breath last, if possible, for a count of four. One last thing before we begin, if it's at all possible and safe for you to do so, go ahead and try to close your eyes to reduce distraction as we go through our exercises. So everyone closing the eyes, you're gonna finish up whatever exhale you find yourself on. With the eyes closed on the next inhale, you're going to take a big deep breath in through the nose for a count of one, two, and three.

PF: On the exhale, slowly releasing it through the mouth for a count of one, two and three. Beginning again on the inhale, slowly through the nose, one, two, and three. Exhaling through the mouth, two and three. One more round of breath, inhale through the nose, two and three, exhale through the mouth, two and three. Now we're gonna move on to those four count inhales, inhaling through the nose, lengthen the spine, open the heart, two, three and four. Exhaling through the mouth. Letting go, three and four. Two more rounds, inhale, two, three, four. Exhaling through the mouth, two, three, and four. Now maybe say to yourself, I am beginning a brand new moment on the inhale, two, three, four. On the exhale, I am letting go of anxiety, two, three, and four. And now just sit for a moment and notice your natural breath. Notice if you've lost your strong posture or you've maintained it. Notice if you feel more relaxed or calmer after those cleansing breath.

DZ: Thank you so much, Porsche. I definitely notice that I feel more relaxed and more calm. I was going through that breathing exercise as you were narrating it, and definitely noticed that I feel a little bit more at ease than I did even just a couple of months ago, so thank you for that, I appreciate it.

PF: Awesome.

DZ: So, so far in our chat today, we've learned about some resilient strategies, so we've talked about the what, now I'd like to get into a little bit more of the how. How exactly can CHWs incorporate some of these strategies like mindfulness, refraining, breathing into their busy work days?

PF: Okay, as we demonstrated in the exercise we just did, breathing exercises are something you can do just about anywhere and with just about anyone. So they are also very simple and accessible for you to create mindfulness in the workplace and also very easy to share with co-workers, people in the community or even in your own home. As a CHW, breathing techniques can be a very useful tool for your own tool belt. The great thing about them is that it doesn't matter how you do them, this is a great way to press pause on a stressful situation or potentially emotional situation, and focus on something else for a few moments. Long, slow, deep breaths, definitely calm the body and the mind, no question. But sometimes all we need is a few moments for those strong emotions to pass. Once they do, we are better able to respond appropriately instead of reacting out of habit. This allows us to reframe any situation in a healthier way with increased clarity, better judgment, and a non-reactive mind.

DZ: I really like those last couple of points there. And I think it makes sense to be able to have some of these strategies in your tool belt. So regardless of where you are, who you're around, you can employ them to be able to get through whatever challenging moment that you're facing. So, Porsche, you know, this conversation has been really helpful, and I hope that this will be helpful for our community health workers and other public health professionals that may be tuning in today. I definitely feel much calmer just reflecting on our conversation. But as we wrap up, I'm interested if you could share something that has been helping you get through the pandemic, what is something that has provided you comfort or inspiration during the... Nearly two years now?

PF: Okay, I like to find things that will lift me up, give me hope, strengthen my spirit. So I would like to share a series of videos on YouTube that are perfect for this type of year that my daughter shared with me, and they are called the Secret Santa specials. [chuckle] So they're just a series of videos that will uplift anyone who watches them, because they include random acts of kindness people are doing to surprise each other. And they are absolutely amazing. So if you go to YouTube and type in Secret Santa Specials, there are several different versions that will pop up and they're all amazing.

DZ: That sounds really fun. It's a bit of a tongue twister there, [laughter] Secret Santa Specials. Yeah.

PF: Yeah.

DZ: Well, thank you so much, Porsche for joining us today to share from your experiences and to provide so much insight on this topic. To our listeners, we hope that you've learned some new things about resilient strategies for community health workers. And we encourage you to check out some of the resources that we'll share in the podcast notes, as well as an evaluation and a transcript. Funding for this podcast is provided by the Health Resources and Services Administration. And with that we'll end here for today. Stay safe and stay curious, everyone.

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