Building Mental Fortitude:
Best Practices for Supporting Individual and Staff Joy in Work During COVID-19

COVID-19 has left the current Public Health workforce over-tasked and under-resourced, causing a mass exodus and widespread burnout. This session created space to reflect on the behavioral and emotional barriers that precede burnout, as well as specific strategies to build individual resiliency and develop system-wide changes for employee support and re-engagement. Panelists discussed best practices to institutionalize support for workplace stressors.

What is building mental fortitude?

- Building mental fortitude refers to the practice of prioritizing mental and physical wellness in the workplace, both individually and communally.

- Building mental fortitude is a way to combat toxic work environments and burnout and a way to infuse joy into the workplace.

- Building mental fortitude should be a collaborative practice among communities, or between communities and institutions. Those who have the most pain — who are at the highest risk of burnout — are also those who know the most about building up their own mental fortitude.

Why is building mental fortitude important?

- The current health system in the United States has been created to favor certain populations and to perpetuate inequality among other populations, particularly Black, Brown, Indigenous, and working-class Americans.

- These inequalities lead to toxic work environments and high rates of burnout among these populations, particularly among those working within health systems and other institutions.

- Effectively building mental fortitude within workplaces will create stronger cultures of mental wellness and more united workplaces.

How can organizations build mental fortitude among their staff?

As a first step, organizations need to recognize where they are and where they want to be, with regard to mental wellness.

- **They need to recognize impending signs of burnout among staff and signs of a toxic workplace, including:**

  - Exhaustion, fatigue, and lower energy at work.

  - Less team building and less interest at work.

  - Lateness or absence for meetings and workplace communications.

  - Reduced productivity and increased mistakes/errors.

  - High staff turnover.

- **Organizations must make wellness a priority at every level of their work, including through:**

  - Incorporating staff wellness and retention into strategic priorities, staff meetings, retreats, and other workplace activities.

- ◦ Normalizing taking time off, both through PTO and through breaks throughout the workday.

- ◦ Creating individual development and wellness plans.

- ◦ Coaching organizational leadership on prioritizing wellness, especially among their reports.

- • **Organizations also need to collaboratively design healing systems with those whom the systems are intended to heal. This includes:**

- ◦ Naming and acknowledging that many populations are not best served by traditional health services and that alternative systems are often a better way to heal these communities/populations.

- ◦ Recognizing that, while traditional health systems have money for services to build mental fortitude, communities often have more creative solutions for building mental fortitude and the will to make alternative health services successful.

- ◦ Cooperating with those outside institutions to build alternative healing systems.

Resources to learn from:

The below resources may be helpful starting points for health departments, but it is important to note that every community is different, so these resources may need to be adapted.

Addressing Emotional Wellness During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Promotores in Delivering Integrated Mental Health Care and Social Services

A peer-reviewed study that discusses an intervention to integrate mental health care with referrals to address social determinants of health. This community-driven intervention focused on Latino individuals who had not been adequately served by traditional health interventions.

Challenges and Opportunities for Strengthening the US Public Health Infrastructure

A report that lists recommendations for workplace policy changes to support employee wellness in public health agencies. Highlighted policies in the time of COVID-19 include flexible schedules and remote work.

COVID-19 Mental Health Handbook: Evidence-Informed Approaches to Mental Wellbeing During a Pandemic

A handbook that covers a range of strategies for promoting mental health during crises with sections on particular populations, including healthcare workers. The handbook focuses on strategies like coping, building resilience, and dealing with stress and isolation.

Psychological Support in a COVID-19 Hospital: A Community Case Study

A case study that discusses how to reduce provider burnout during crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic. The intervention placed psychologists at a hospital to provide needed on-site services.

Workplace Interventions in Response to COVID-19: An Occupational Health Psychology Perspective

Recommendations that discuss workplace adaptations to address mental health needs. The article proposes interventions on eight different topics, including psychological well-being.

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