TIP Mini-Toolkit: Supporting Staff during COVID-19

During a crisis like COVID-19, we are often called upon to go above and beyond in responding to our colleagues, supervisees, loved ones, neighbors, and communities. At times, we may feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to best support our colleagues and staff when they are struggling with change, loss, and potential mental health concerns. Although it is not your job as director or supervisor to provide therapy to your supervisees, you can still respond in a caring manner that creates safety, builds trust, and resists retraumatization. As we lean on Our Approach and the agency value of optimism during this difficult time, it is up to us create a positive parallel process that impacts teams, staff, and the participants we serve in a trauma-informed and affirming way.

Before you respond, we encourage you to remember to P.R.E.P.

**Pause**

- Take a moment to pause and notice what’s happening internally and externally.
- Take 2 to 3 slow deep breaths, focusing your attention on the physical feeling of breathing. Allow your mind to fully relax as you breathe.

**Reflect**

- Ask yourself*
  - What am I feeling right now?
  - How is the situation or environment affecting me right now?

**Explore**

- Ask yourself *
  - What does the staff feel, need, or want?
  - How is the situation or environment affecting the staff right now?
  - How do I best respond?

**Positive (self-talk)**

- Offer yourself words of encouragement. You can tell yourself, “It’s normal to feel this way right now”, “this feeling/situation will pass”, “I can get through this meeting”, or “I’ve overcome difficult, uncertain situations before.”

*Questions adapted from Therapeutic Crisis Intervention

**Four Ways to Support Your Staff: Listen, Acknowledge, Validate, Ask Questions (L.A.V.A.)**

Once you’ve done your P.R.E.P., you may feel more ready to approach staff who could be feeling anxious, scared, worried, overwhelmed, and/or stressed. The following steps (L.A.V.A.) can guide you in the process as you seek to support, reassure, and empower your staff in a trauma-informed way.
Listen

- Give your full attention to the supervisee. Minimize distractions and practice being fully present.
- Pay close attention to what is being said, as well as non-verbal communication like body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and any underlying feelings you’re sensing (your own and your supervisee’s).
- Listen with the intent to hear and understand, not to respond.
- Be aware of and resist the urge to interrupt, rush to respond, analyze, or offer quick solutions.

Acknowledge

- If a staff has opened up to you about something difficult for them, acknowledge that it is not an easy thing to share and thank them for sharing it with you.
- Take the time to clarify what you’ve heard to make sure that you and your staff are on the same page.
- Say things like “I just want to make sure I understood you correctly. It sounds like you’re saying __________. Is that accurate?”

Validate

Validation is the recognition or affirmation that a person or their feelings or opinions are valid or worthwhile. To thrive, human beings need validating experiences and relationships in their lives. In times of crisis, the act of validating another person’s feelings, thoughts, concerns, and experiences has a powerful, calming effect on the central nervous system and stress response, and is critical in promoting resiliency and nurturing relationships in times of stress and adversity.

Say things like:

- “It’s understandable that you feel afraid and anxious about coming in to work right now.”
- “It’s normal to feel frustrated because you don’t know what to expect from day to day.”
- “I hear you, you’re dealing with so much right now and it’s just not easy”.
- “I know it may be hard to see right now but I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you are doing. You add so much to the team.”

Ask Questions

- If the staff feels comfortable discussing their feelings or situation with you more, demonstrate genuine care and interest by asking open-ended questions. Open-ended questions usually start with words like “what”, “how”, “what if”, and “describe.”
- Some examples of open-ended questions include:
  - “Would you tell me more about __________?”
  - “What are your thoughts about what needs to be done?”
  - “How can I best support you right now?”
  - “In light of everything we’ve talked about, how can we best use the rest of our supervision time today?”
Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms of COVID-19 Related Trauma in Staff

It’s important to recognize the signs that staff are struggling at this time. These feelings and behaviors are often normal responses to abnormal circumstances; patience, support, and kindness are critical to helping staff manage these reactions. It can also be helpful to encourage staff to use their safety plans to support healthy coping.

You may notice that staff are exhibiting a few, some, or many of the following feelings and behaviors*:

*Not an exhaustive list. For additional signs and symptoms, please see the March 2020 TIP of the Month on The Four R’s: Recognize.

Further Considerations during Times of Uncertainty

As we strive to create positive parallel processes with our teams and staff, we may find it challenging to lead effectively in this rapidly changing and uncertain climate. Information and recommendations change daily, hindering the ability of staff to respond accordingly. When there are no concrete answers, it can be difficult to keep up with the present, let alone envisioning a future for staff and participants. This is the time to lean into strategies such as P.R.E.P. and L.A.V.A., as well as open communication, modeling, and acceptance of the unknown. Consider the following:

- If you have credible information, share it appropriately and review it often.
- Recognize that it’s okay if you don’t know the answer. Acknowledge that you don’t know and reassure staff that you will aim to find out and will update if an answer becomes available.
- Anticipate crisis (if possible) based on what you know about how staff are feeling and responding – practice secondary prevention by intervening early.
- Say what you mean and mean what you say – be cautious about making promises if you may not be able to keep them.
• Learn from crisis – take note of lessons learned to apply in the future.
• Ask for help – seek out support from supervisors, colleagues, and mentors; you don’t have to go it alone and we are stronger together.
• Remember the Green Door – during the hard moments, stay connected to our mission, values, and roots; lean into the mission of the work, invoke core agency and team values, and stay rooted in our GSS history.

- compassion - commitment - bold leadership - learning - optimism - responsiveness

**Additional Mental Health and Crisis Support Resources**

Some staff may benefit from additional resources for mental health counseling, crisis support, community-building agency events, and more. Below is a list of resources shared by GSS Executive Director, Michelle Yanche, which you can provide to your staff:

**Sheltering Arms:** Sheltering Arms has offered our staff access to their counseling services. Staff can email stafftelecounseling@shelteringarmsny.org and you will be connected to a counselor to help address issues related to trauma, stress, anxiety and grief.

**ACS Crisis and Bereavement Counseling:** The Administration for Children’s Services is partnering with the NY Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to provide free crisis counseling and bereavement services to essential staff, focused on crisis, grief and loss. The contact person is Luisa Nannini: lnannini@nyspcc.org - 347-326-4055.

**Employee Assistance Program:** For short-term free counseling: 1-800-964-3577. If you see a therapist/counselor already, check if they can do remote phone or skype sessions.

**Internal GSS Offerings:** Please take a look at the April Mission and Culture Calendar to find opportunities to connect with colleagues while participating in the stress relieving offerings we have available.

**COFCCA Support Group** Support group for those with or recovering from COVID-19 every Friday at 10am at 646 889 2259. This group will be led by Lisa, who is recovering herself from COVID-19. Staff can join for as many weeks as they would like, no commitment of any kind. All staff/all job titles with/recovering from COVID-19 are invited. Additional support groups for supervisors and foster care case planners are also available. For more information, please reach out to Lisa: lgitelson@cofcca.org
The NYC ACS “Coping through COVID” Campaign was launched this week. The campaign is aimed at child safety and supports for families, and offers many different resources on food pantries, free WiFi, housing assistance and more. www.nyc.gov/acss/covidhelp

NYS/Headspace Partnership: To combat “cabin fever” and stress that some people are experiencing during this necessary social isolation response to COVID19 and NY PAUSE, New York State is partnering with Headspace.com to provide free mindfulness, meditation and mental health resources to all New Yorkers. This is a great resource for everyone – youth and staff alike! They are available at Headspace.com/ny.

The New York State Emotional Support Hotline operated by OMH also continues to be available 1-844-863-9314.

NYC Anti-Violence Project crisis hotline for LGBTQ & HIV-affected survivors of interpersonal violence: 212-714-1141

Safe Horizon’s domestic violence hotline: 1-800-621-HOPE (4673)

NYC WELL: Call 888-NYC-WELL or Text WELL to 65173 to connect with free and confidential mental health sessions. You can also click here

For more facts and resources, please visit: https://www1.nyc.gov/site/coronavirus/index.page