

From Treading Water to Thriving

Sun, 8/23 7:12PM 27:41

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

jody, students, people, colleagues, important, sarah, talking, kim, faculty, coping, stressful, support, recharge, faculty members, care, engage, stress, feel, manage, variables

SPEAKERS

Sarah Kirk, Kim Warren, Jody Brook



This is one of a series of podcasts from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas.



Jody Brook 00:15

Hi, everyone, this is Jody Brook with the school of social welfare. I'm also a faculty fellow at the Center for Teaching Excellence. And I'm joined by colleague Sarah Kirk. Sarah, I'll have you introduce yourself.



Sarah Kirk 00:31

Hi, everyone. I'm Sarah Kirk. I'm the director of the KU psychological clinic and mental health clinic in the psychology department, on faculty in the psychology department. Welcome everyone.



Jody Brook 00:42

Okay, so our first question today is what does take care of yourself mean to you in relation to your role as a faculty member?

S

Sarah Kirk 00:54

I'll go ahead and start with that taking care of yourself is really something that is individual for everyone. And lots of variables go into what works for you to take care of yourself. Those may be individual variables, like what kind of personality you have, what kind of interests you have. It could be cultural variables, what is always work for you within your culture, family-driven variables. So there's lots that goes into that mix, into that recipe, for each individual. So a lot of times, there's things that come out, whether it be broadcasts, written messages about self-care, and things you try don't really help you. They don't help manage your stress or help you thrive. So what I suggest is that you try things that you're drawn to, that engage you and do seem to help you manage that stress and engage in self-care, and then use those things. And sometimes you might have to change. You know, there might be something that's working for you for a while, and then it doesn't seem to be doing the trick anymore. And again, something that just doesn't allow you to flourish, enjoy, relax -- lots of different things. And one thing with COVID-19 is it's been such an extended period of time for a lot of individuals -- again, it's been quite stressful -- you may need to change it up over time. And also, I'd just like to hear what Jody thinks about that question.

J

Jody Brook 02:19

You know, Sarah, I think you bring up an interesting point in that you talked about individuals needing to try new things. One thing that I think is really been challenging about COVID is that a lot of folks typically will engage in things like maybe they like to go out to eat, or maybe they like to join friends for a cup of coffee or things like that. And the very nature of the COVID pandemic has been that there is a high degree of isolation that's come along with it. And so I think that a lot of us are challenged to find ways to engage in self-care, but what I would say as faculty members is that I think that we all have a multi-dimensional demands placed on us. And I think it's really important for us to look at each of those dimensions, and to say, How can I take care of myself within these and to approach this really intentionally because we know that the upcoming year is going to be stressful. And so being proactive on the front end and saying, you know, whether I think I'm going to need it or not, let me plan and let me build it in. That generally helps me and it's easier to engage in self-care when you do it, say from the very beginning than when you have to come from behind and you're working from a deficit and a place of being really burnt out. Least that's always been the way it is for me.

S

Sarah Kirk 03:53

Yeah, and I think like you said, You leave some room for those individual variables. Like there's some of us that aren't planners. I think we probably all know faculty members

that tend to fly by the seat of their pants, and that syllabus is getting ready right before the first days of classes. Others, we feel much more comfortable if we're building that syllabus months in advance. So again, I think it can vary from person to person. And one of the things I heard you say, though, that I think is really important, again, is just thinking about it being intentional. That doesn't mean necessarily that you plan ahead sometimes, but that you're thinking, that's got to be part of the deal. Self-care has got to be part of what I'm doing, or like you said that burnout is really gonna hit.

K

Kim Warren 04:36

If I could jump in and ask, though, what happens, because I hear a lot of advice about being flexible and also being mindful and planning, but what if we don't do that? And what are some indicators that remind us that we need to do those if we're not so careful about planning ahead of time? Are there warning signs? Are there things that we should look out for? What are the indicators that should tell us we need to stop and actually do that kind of careful planning or help our colleagues do that kind of careful planning?

S

Sarah Kirk 05:08

I think they might be internal and external. So there might be those internal indicators, Kim, where you're feeling your stress level rise. You're feeling more tense. You're not getting enough sleep. You're not engaging in some of the things -- eating right, things like that -- that really keep our bodies going. And there could be extra indicators. You're getting a lot of feedback from students that is negative, or maybe colleagues saying that they're concerned about you. So it could be a little bit both. It could be our family members that are kind of saying, you know, I'm a little concerned that you're on email late at night. Is there anything I can help you with? And that's one thing I do want to say, too: As much as we can help each other ... Jody, I know you said, we look to each other a lot of times in times of stress, and I think we have to be innovative about it and creative, whether it's we are connecting with colleagues through Zoom. It might be we're setting In lawn chairs at a coffee shop well away from each other or hanging out in backyards. And I think that's important, too, that we kind of find a way to help each other. And Jody, what do you think about those warning signs? What indicative to you in your experience?

J

Jody Brook 06:14

Well, I think that just like what you do to recharge your battery, I think that what your warning signs are can be really individualized. But I think we all know when we're approaching the danger zone. I think that there comes a time when we have to commit to a level of self-awareness that says, Okay, I'm starting to be pushed here, and I'm pushing

too hard, or I've been pushed too far. Or I snapped at a colleague or I've been up at 2 a.m. multiple nights in a row or I haven't eaten regularly in four days or I've overeaten, or whatever our own personal triggers are, our signs are that we've stepped over that line. I think that we all know those. And I think it's good to kind of give yourself if you're the kind to do this to say, All right, I'm noticing this. What do I need to do to self-regulate? And to put yourself in that observer role, and to say, What do I need to do to self regulate here? And so for me, it's more about knowing what my own threshold is, and paying attention to that threshold. And so for me, that's usually about sleep, and just in general taking care of my physical health. And if that starts to slide, then I know I'm really out of balance and I need to take care of it.

S

Sarah Kirk 07:50

And I want to say, we're talking a lot about how do we manage negative things but also, it's the fun that it kind of keeps us going. Whether that's just a really short, fun chat with someone, or maybe it's just checking in with your son or daughter or a friend -- something to kind of keep that humor, keep that joy going. Because I think that's something really hard with a prolonged stress like this: We've got to find the joys. We've got to find the delight in every day. There's something out there.

J

Jody Brook 08:21

And Sarah, I want to just piggyback a little bit on what you're saying. So it's just not about catching the negative. It's also about, for me, doing things proactively to be positive and to make sure I give myself energy. So for example, I really like being out in nature and I like flowers. So I've done a lot of work in the garden and flower arranging. I happen to be an early riser, so I'm going outside in the mornings and watching the sunrise. It's something that I can feel internally that recharges my battery. And so whereas in a regular academic year, I might not be paying attention so much to making sure that I do these things that bring me joy. Right now I'm really working hard to try to do those things. Because I know I need them because the world is hard. And we're surrounded with tragedy. And we're trying to connect with students who are in various places in their lives, and many of them in very, very difficult spaces. And so I know that I have to be in the best place I can be in order to be available to them. And so I think we just have to try to work hard to do what we know we need to do, to take care of ourselves in order to be in a place where we can fulfill that part of our job role. And it might be that that part of our job role expands a little bit right now, because our students are in such vulnerable positions. And so it is more demanding. And we've all had to learn how to teach differently.



Sarah Kirk 10:12

Yeah, absolutely.



Jody Brook 10:14

So taken a huge lift, and I just want to acknowledge that.



Sarah Kirk 10:18

And, you know, we talk a lot in psychology about when there's uncontrollable stressors, how that usually is something that's more difficult to cope with than something that is more under our control. And there's just a ton of uncontrollable stressors kind of coming at us constantly and with without any stoppage and from multiple directions. So it's about maybe you're managing your child's education. You're dealing with students. You're dealing with colleagues. You're trying to get to your research and keep it afloat. There's so many things happening that are out of our control. What we can control is something like what Jody's talking about, whether that's I'm going to go ahead and I'm gonna get out there today and I'm going to look at some flowers and be outside for at least a half-hour so I can kind of forge ahead. One other thing I might mention too, because I know we're talking about what a lots of people might try and do. And we also suggest that there's kind of a dose effect, especially with COVID. So if you find yourself constantly dosing yourself with the news about COVID, the news about the university, etc., that can be very daunting. So it might be also taking those things in shorter doses, or what Jody talked about earlier, if you're setting a schedule. It's important to keep up with the news, but it's maybe I'm checking the news and I'm going to check it once or I'm going to check it for this amount of time versus a constant deluge of negative information. And again, it's not to be pollyannish. You're not going to put your head in the sand. But for some people, they're dosing themselves so heavily, it's really, really creating more difficulties for them. I don't know what you think about that, Jody.



Kim Warren 11:58

What it makes me wonder is is how we take this, these great strategies and employ them in the classroom, as well. If we can model this for our students, or if we need to put some structures into place while we have our students, while we're engaging with our students, whether in person or virtually, do we need to help them kind of think about stress reduction as part of their academic strategy, as well?

S

Sarah Kirk 12:22

I definitely think we do. I think one thing is we look to our colleagues and Student Success and the counseling center, they're pushing out a lot of great information right now about how students can manage their stress and resources that can look to, so just being aware of what they are so we can help support our students when they're looking for that information. I think also, Kim and Jody can talk about this with your both your teaching experiences, kind of watching patterns, whether it's those very stressed emails that are coming in to you a student just checking out and not being in contact either virtually or in person, obviously when they are reporting those stressors situations to you. But noticing those, and again, can I offer some support? And also if it goes beyond what an instructor can really do, getting them to the proper resource for additional support. What do you think, Jody?

J

Jody Brook 13:13

I think those are great tips. I'll also say that one thing that I decided to do this semester is I'm beginning my class with a statement on my syllabus about the stressful time that I think that we're in right now, and the resources that are available to students and about how important I think having a supportive classroom climate is and how important I think community is. And also, just with the statement of authenticity with my students that I'm not going to pretend to have any answers about the hardships that they're experiencing related to COVID, but I can hope to point that them in the direction of resources. I can be available to listen. I can help them process the class material and help them stay on track academically. And Sarah, like you were talking about, I believe in trying to sort out that which we can control, and that which we can't, and focus on that. And so I'm going to encourage the students to do the same because I do believe that that helps them have a sense of agency. So that for me is also a part of, in a very macro way, my self-care because if I'm paying attention to my students, and I'm paying attention to my classroom climate, then I'm doing what I need to do as an instructor to approach the classroom in the way that I want to and to set the stage for learning in a way that I can feel good about. And that helps me relieve my own anxiety about the uncertainty ahead. And maybe that's not on someone's list of things that are important to them. But in my discipline, it is something that's really important. So I need to do that. And so I think just deciding what you need to do, and being strategic around it is really a critical factor.

S

Sarah Kirk 15:27

And I also think -- and definitely we've all touched on it -- but again, seeking out that social support network. Again, it might be that you're helping the students, but if you're struggling with the students' situation, reach out for that consultation with a colleague.

Maybe it is talking to student success, and getting some advice. That just helps us function better if we're connecting to others. And again, your department chair is somebody that needs to maybe provide you support if there's things going on that seemed to be getting to a level where you need administration and their support. So just looking to others and making those connections.

J Jody Brook 16:04

I think that those are all great pieces of advice. I think that we're moving now to around our third topic that we wanted to talk about, which was what are some kind of rapid fire ways that we think faculty can reduce stress and improve coping skills? What are easy, kind of off-the-shelf things that we think people can do? So what are some of those things? And I'll extend this to Kim: What are some things that you can do, as well, to help you reduce stress and improve coping?

K Kim Warren 16:44

The main thing I've learned during this period is first of all, admitting that this is a very unprecedented time. And it's a time for change. And as many people have said, there's no playbook there.

S Sarah Kirk 16:58

I think Kim has frozen So we'll pick up and then she can jump back on and pick back up. Is that sound? Okay, Jody?

J Jody Brook 17:04

Yeah. Sounds perfect. Go ahead, Sarah. Okay.

S Sarah Kirk 17:07

Well, I know we talked about it at the beginning to find what works for you. But some things that tend to be pillars, if you will, is one is, is if you can attend to those primary needs, and primary needs are things like sleep, eating, drinking enough water. So if we're managing our intake of food, things like that, and again, it doesn't necessarily mean that everybody has to eat healthy. I always say say everything in moderation. You know, one thing that a lot of people have enjoyed during COVID is some baking. So it's really nice to have a treat sometimes and enjoy those things. But what we're encountering with a lot of patients that we work with in our clinic, is sleep schedules being very, very differential,

meaning that people's sleep is kind of all out of whack because they don't necessarily have a schedule. And that goes back to something Jody said earlier, it is helpful to have some semblance of a schedule. And it might not mean that it's full for every hour, but I'm going to aim to get up by this time, do school and other activities during this time, and sleep during this time. And again, if you can try to keep that on a day/night schedule, that's probably preferable because it just works with their natural circadian rhythms. I understand there's some night owls out there and that's okay. But again, as long as you're then targeting kind of when you're going to be awake and doing things that works for you. So those are some things I always recommend is just kind of attending to getting some level of activation, sleeping adequately, and trying to eat in a way that's right for you.

J

Jody Brook 18:50

Yeah, and for me, I try to, if I'm feeling overwhelmed, and I just really feel like I need to reduce my stress immediately, I try to do what we call partializing the problem. I try to take something and put it into the most manageable timeframe or minute that I possibly can. So I look at what do I need to do for the next possible day or to get me through the next class I have to teach or to get my research report turned in. And so I take whatever is that next chunk of time ahead of me, and I make a really short-term plan for that. And so instead of being overwhelmed, especially in the time of COVID, with all of this unknown that no one has an answer to when the end is in sight here, just bringing that calendar a little bit closer in and saying what is my next deadline and, and that kind of activity is really helpful for me. On a personal level, I do things like read books that I've wanted to read or get out in nature or go have coffee with a friend or do deep breathing or something. So, you know, I think that there are things that we can all -- what are the kind of things that we can plug and play. There's a list that I have, and I keep it taped to my computer. So that whenever I am feeling really stressed out at work, I can just look at the list and say, Okay, I need to take a break for 30 minutes and, and do that. And so if that can be helpful. Kim, do you have any comments?

K

Kim Warren 20:41

Well, I was thinking about, you know, the wonderful thing about lists is that you can do that kind of immediate prioritizing, but you can also convince yourself that some things can wait. And if you put it on a list, they won't go away. Those things will be there later. We can kind of relieve the immediacy, the stress of the immediacy, by understanding that we can write things down. We won't forget about them, but we can tend to them later. So I appreciate how each of you has been able to not only give advice from a personal standpoint, but from your professional capacities, as well. In addition to dealing with my internet and consistency this morning, you're actually modeling this kind of flexibility of

just taking the situation that we're in and running with it and not not making it more stressful, but just just moving forward with what we we can do. I think you've provided a lot of good takeaways for other faculty. Are there any other pieces of advice that you're hoping?

S

Sarah Kirk 21:55

Three things that I'm just going to branch off something you said Kim, that I think is really important. And that is, Let it go. If I tried to do everything I had set out for me every day, I'd go bananas because I always have to let things go. I've always set myself up basically for failure if I have to think I have to do all that stuff. And like you said, if it's somewhere, it's gonna get done eventually. And so sometimes you just have to let some things go, especially during this time, because you're having to be flexible. So like you said, if you end up responding to a bunch of student emails you didn't anticipate, then you're going to have to let something else go and just being okay with yourself with that. And again, getting support from a colleague about how to maybe manage those things as they're coming through. The other thing I just want to leave people with is there are multiple forms of coping. And what we find is actually most people engage in a combination of things most of the time. So we mostly engage in problem solving, and what we call emotion-focused coping. And emotional-focused coping has a lot to do. It's processing emotions, getting social support and talking through our emotions with people. And what you have to know is problem solving just won't work with something that's uncontrollable because you might not be able to solve it. And so it's great to be able to use those more emotion-focused strategies when problem solving doesn't work. So it's great, because they all work. It's just that they work differently at different times. And again, people have to individualize it, of what works for them. Jody ...

J

Jody Brook 23:26

What has worked for you at one time in your life can also not work for you now. And I really liked something that Sarah said earlier, which is that she had tried yoga, and it really didn't work as a form of self-care for her. And yoga actually doesn't work well for me either. And I really tried for a long time to make it work because so many people had talked about what a great form of self-care it was. So I approached it like, Why isn't this working for me? Then I finally found something that did work. And what it became was an exercise in learning what I needed to do for me. And I think that's the spirit that it's most helpful to approach this in, which is just like what recharges my battery whenever I'm finished with it, versus what takes away from me. And I think during this time, what we're all needing is to have more energy when we leave a situation than when we approach it. Because we know that some situations that we get in are just going to be difficult from the

get-go because we're living in a world that is filled with disease and tragedy and uncertainty right now. And I think we have to acknowledge that and put it out there and say that we know some of this is just going to be very difficult, and we need to find our ways of coping.

S

Sarah Kirk 25:00

And again, amidst all that, it's a delight that I've met Kim Warren. I've not met Kim before and she's got a shadow of Fraser behind her while I'm in Fraser. Maybe it's actually the social welfare building. But it's like she's here with me. This is so fun. And this is amidst the day we're trying to reopen a clinic, we're trying to get all our courses ready. But this has been a really, really cool experience just to be with each other today. And to be with all of you.

K

Kim Warren 25:30

Thanks for saying that, Sarah. I think we're actually in this global crisis, and in a lot of ways we are fortunate to be in a community at the University of Kansas, where students, faculty, staff -- everyone -- is really trying to help, where the digging in is about helping each other, helping ourselves but helping each other and maintaining our commitment to learning, maintaining our commitment to learning for the sake of helping other people and become professionals in our various fields. I think we're really fortunate that we've landed where we are right now physically or virtually, with other people who have that similar mindset. So, Sarah, I agree with you. Jody, I know you feel the same way. And hopefully this podcast and podcasts like this can help other faculty continue to kind of stay motivated, recharge, using a phrase that Jody just used. I heard a lot about being flexible, a lot about acknowledging the difficulty that we're in. I heard a lot -- I don't know if anyone used the word grace, but it seems like both of are advising that we all give ourselves a lot of grace and each other a lot of grace during this time period. But overall what I'm hearing is this tone, which is focused on not just surviving these crises that we're experiencing, but really holding on and moving forward and becoming better on the other side. So I want to thank you both for your professional commitments, but also your willingness to share your personal insights, as well.