

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Tracey Marchese:

If you are looking to who you want to be, that's great, but who are you and where are you? And just to look at yourself not as a negative and to say, I'm a work in progress, not that I'm a failure, right? And I have to be better. Hey, I'm work in progress and I'm going to be a work in progress my entire life. So, I think that's some of the worst problems that we, especially Americans have, is we're always comparing ourselves to everything and everyone else, some sort of higher level of whatever that we're supposed to be that society tells us we're supposed to be, instead of just accepting who we are right now and then saying,

Tracey Marchese:

It's interesting. The mind-body piece actually started in high school. I took a high school yoga class and learned how to meditate, and I said, wow, this is really kind of cool. And then I went to college and some of my coursework, I was a psych major in undergrad, and some of my coursework kind of took me in that mind-body realm again. And then when I went to graduate school for social work, it just kept showing up. And when you move into your practice field, that's when I started to learn more about trauma because I started realizing how many of my clients experienced, whether we call it Big T or little T, Trauma. And so the big T's are the big events that happen to people. I don't

they were battling with comparison syndrome or feeling isolated, what are some ways that people might be able to seek further help or try to pull themselves... Besides of course, the professional piece, which is a very valuable component to this. What's the best practices you might have for those audience members?

start doing this year that would then get you ready for your attainable goal to be able to run that marathon? So maybe this year you run a half-marathon, and you do that, you look at what's available maybe in August or September, so that you give yourself eight, nine months to start training for that. So you see the difference between the pie-in-the-sky kind of goal that I've never run before, but I'm going to run a marathon in 10 months. Or could I run a half-marathon in 10 months or nine months? And so think about shifting your goals so that, yes, I still have this long-term goal, but what could I do in the shorter term? So that would get me to that goal.

So what do I do now? Well, if I don't exercise at all, maybe I need to start with walking and maybe not running, at first. And so what's an attainable goal? Well, maybe I'll start with 15 minutes a day, and let me do that for a week. And then let me go to a half an hour a day and see how my body takes to that, and then build from there. And there's my three weeks is a habit. Now I'm walking a little bit every day, but I'm not saying I'm going to walk an hour a day and I'm going to that. And I'm using this, this is kind of a silly example, but think about people have weight loss goals. I want to lose 50 pounds by June. That would be dieting in a very unhealthy way to lose that much weight in six months.

So instead of saying, I need to lose this much weight, what things about my eating could I change and make different? And it can't be, I need to restrict everything that I eat. It's let me start with one thing that I'm going to change. Maybe I could change what I have for breakfast and let me focus on that for three weeks or a month, and then let me see about how could I change maybe the types of food that I'm eating and not necessarily the amounts. Or maybe I know that this is my worst time of day for snacking, and so what snacks could I change? If snacking is my biggest problem, then what kind of snacks could I change, instead of let me try this diet.

Everybody's going to do the diet and most diets aren't sustainable. Things like a Weight Watchers might be because that's more about natural food instead of very restricted, and I'm only going to eat this type and I'm only going to do this and that even a change to a Mediterranean diet, for example, is going to be much more healthy and you're going to be eating differently, versus let me try this bad diet that I'm probably going to get sick of or it's going to fail me after the first few weeks.

Being able to set smaller, more attainable goals, and then tweak the goal moving forward, it really leads to much more satisfaction. It leads to much more ability to feel proud of an accomplishment because you set a smaller goal instead of this long-term unattainable goal.

John Boccacino:

And I think it's really important. I want to hammer home, too, this point, start where you are. It's not about where you want to be. It's where you are currently in this moment and what can be done to then find that version, that better self, that happens to be out there.

Tracey Marchese:

Absolutely. If you are looking to who you want to be, that's great, but who are you and where are you? And just to look at yourself not as a negative and to say, I'm a work in progress, not that I'm a failure and I have to be better. It's, hey, I'm a work in progress and I'm going to be a work in progress my entire life.

So my work in progress right now is I'd like to do this. What's the first step in doing this thing that I want to do? Let me start there. Because that's really accepting who you are. And I think that's some of the worst problems that we, especially Americans, have is we're always comparing ourselves to everything and everyone else, some sort of higher level of whatever that we're supposed to be that society tells us we're supposed to be, instead of just accepting who we are right now, and then saying, okay, and what would I like to maybe change about myself? And how can I begin that versus just saying, oh, well, I'm awful the way I am and I have to do, anything will be better than what I'm doing.

John Boccacino:

And I think another piece that I want to talk about with you is the accountability component as well, whether it's keeping a journal, whether it's an active list of I walked 15 minutes today, five days a week, and you kind of build upon that. What are some recommendations for accountability you can offer up that will help people reach their goals?

Tracey Marchese:

Yeah, I think that trackers, because now everything is electronic, either your phone or your Fitbit or whatever, we can track ourselves. And sometimes those things can be extremely helpful. Sometimes they can actually be harmful. So I think that, if people are looking at their fitness tracker and, oh my God, I didn't get my 10,000 steps in today. Oh, I'm a failure. If we're into all-or-nothing thinking and we know that about ourselves, that's not going to be helpful because all it's going to serve to do is defeat you.

And so what are the things that can serve to motivate you versus defeat you? And so maybe, again, each person is going to have to decide that for themselves, but if you find yourself using fitness trackers and then beating yourself up for not being perfect, that's not helpful. And that will actually, eventually cause you to feel so defeated, you'll probably give up.

So for some folks, it'll work great. For some folks it will not. I think that oftentimes buddying up and having a buddy to do stuff with, that keeps you accountable, and it also makes things more fun.

Journaling can be super helpful for people, again, if it's done in the right context to say, hey, I'm just kind of tracking my progress, how I go. And can you allow yourself, well, I had a really bad cold, so I really didn't do my, whatever my fitness goal today, or whatever I was going to do. Maybe my writing goal today, maybe you promised yourself you were going to journal every day or something like that and you didn't write because you weren't feeling well. Can you cut yourself some slack? And maybe when you do reflect on it the next day to say, but taking care of myself and having that extra sleep was my self-care in order to allow myself to heal, so that I could get back to these routines again instead of going into the automatic negative, beat myself up because I didn't do it all right kind of thing.

John Boccacino:

Besides the obvious ones of, I want to lose weight, I want to become more active, what are some other maybe lesser known but still impactful self-care, self-help resolutions that should be focused on maybe in the new year?

Tracey Marchese:

Well, something I would love people to focus on is, one of the greatest self-care strategies is a way in which to keep yourself regulated. And how do we do that? We know that life is stressful, and the antidote to stress is the relaxation response, which is different than relaxing, putting your feet on good book, watching a movie, that's relaxing. I get that. The relaxation response is a response that you can elicit in your own body, and when you do, it literally counteracts the effects of stress. So stress causes havoc in the body, the stress, when we're in a stressful situation, the same chemicals that get released in your body during fight or flight are released during stress just in lower amounts, but for longer periods of time. And it's quite unhealthy for us, not only physically, but mentally as well.

And so, one of the greatest things that is available to us that we don't actually need money to pay for, is using our own bodies to help us relax. And the research that's been studied, if I told you, you would probably say, and your listeners would probably go, yeah, is she kidding? So here's what I'm going to tell you. The research says that doing these types of techniques 20 minutes twice a day, and that's the part that I said, your listeners are going to be like, what is she kidding, is what's been studied. But I'll tell you what it shows, and then I'll tell you what's realistic, okay?

So the research shows that people that do these types of things 20 minutes twice a day actually go to the doctor eight times less frequently. And so what we find is that people do better. They do better on

Yeah, seasonal affective disorder is real. It happens often in the fall, because our days get shorter. And so what happens is it can start to happen as soon as the days start getting shorter and shorter, and we have less and less sunlight. So we know that the shortest day of the year is the day of the winter solstice, which is December, I think, somewhere around the 21st, and then it'll start to get lighter again. But during those dark months, we get less sunlight, and it's believed that sunlight actually helps to trigger serotonin, which is the thing that helps us feel less depressed or feel more happy. And so if we have less production of serotonin, we might have more symptoms of depression. The other thing that's also being studied is melatonin, which is the sleep hormone. And again, that kicks in when it's dark out.

So those combinations of things can really affect our brain chemistry. And so for some folks it mimics it can go from anything from some more mild symptoms, like fatigue, and sort of feeling like I want to sleep more and maybe having trouble getting up in the morning. We may be craving more carbohydrates and maybe eating some more. And those are kind of the symptoms, but you can also have some symptoms of depression.

And so in the more severe cases, people can go into a full-blown depression that only happens during those months where there's less light. And so I will tell you, I don't get full on seasonal affective disorder, but I will get fatigue, which will usually set in for me sometime around beginning of February. So I actually take proactive steps to counteract that.

John Boccacino:

What are some things people can do proactively to deal with a seasonal affective disorder?

Tracey Marchese:

So for me, I actually use something called a light box, and these are, it's bright light therapy. And so believe it or not, I'm originally from New Jersey and I've been using a light box since I lived in New Jersey. Up here, it is a lot darker, a lot more cloudy days thanks to our lake effects snow machine up here. So I use a light box.

Now, light therapy is something that has been shown to help with seasonal affective disorder, especially the folks who don't go into full-blown depression. And how it works is you would need to get not just turning on some bright lights in your house, there's actually a special machine that, they're a lot more accessible than they used to be. So the one that I have is by a company that's been around for 30 years that specializes in light therapy. And any of the light boxes, but you can get them on Amazon now and they're about the size of a tablet. The thing that you want to look for is something that has 10,000 lux, L-U-X. So the light itself is 10,000 lux. Now, depending upon the size of the machine that you get, is how close you need to sit to it and for how long you need to sit in front of it.

So I have a very small little machine and I have to sit about 14 inches away from it, so it's pretty close I have to sit to it. Now, you don't stare at it or anything like that, but it needs to be shining on, shining near your eyes. You can be looking down, that's perfectly fine. You certainly don't have to stare at it, but you start with about a half an hour, and you do it every day, because it sometimes takes two or three weeks to start to see the results from it. And so you sit in front of that light or that light box for about 30 minutes a day. For me, I do it during my morning routine, so I might be eating breakfast or putting makeup on, so it's again, nothing that I have to just sit and do, right? Because who's got time?

I get it. But could we have it nearby with our morning routine where you might be able to do that. Certain people will need more time in front of that light box. The thing that's important if you decide, if your listeners decide, to do this is that you have to do it in the morning. You don't do this in the afternoon or the evening because it can actually disrupt your sleep cycle. But the bright light therapy has been shown

is very common up here. Regardless of my routine and such, I have been vitamin D deficient since I've lived up here, at least twice in 16 years.

So it's very common in areas where we don't have a lot of sunlight in the wintertime. And that would be a blood test to go to your doctor and ask to have it tested because you might need vitamin D therapy, particularly in these winter months, and that can deplete your energy as well.

So there are ways to navigate that that have been shown. Like I said, both the light therapy and vitamin D, just even getting outside. Some folks will need professional help. And if you say to yourself, but why don't I feel this way? I'm usually fine. Why am I all of a sudden this way? Well, it might depend. This winter might be worse than other winters or with the lack of sunlight, we've had a lot of gray days recently. So that might be a contributing factor.

And so don't hesitate to ask for help. And it might be that your doctor tests you for D first before considering doing something like medication. They might suggest you get some therapy first, before they're going to go run right to medication. But not to say that medication, some people do need it just during those winter months, and then they don't need it in the spring and summer months.

John Boccacino:

There's a strong connection between how our mental health and well-being impacts our overall well-being. It's not two parts of the house that are separate from each other, they're codependent. They rely on each other and they feed off each other.

Tracey Marchese:

Absolutely. Our mind and body are always working together. And to ignore one is ignoring both, because one will affect the other, regardless.

John Boccacino:

It's really been a fascinating conversation. I hope our audience has enjoyed hearing the insights of Tracey Marchese, Professor of Practice in the School of Social Work. Really appreciate your expertise, sharing some pointers and tips for us on self-care, sticking to New Year's resolutions, and focusing on the mental health and well-being. Tracey, thank you for the time and best of luck with all your future research and your teachings.

Tracey Marchese:

Thank you so much for having me. I hope your listeners get something out of this.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. My name is Jon Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.