

>> Thank you for tuning in to the healthy minds podcast to host conversations with people who really good listeners.

And we asked them to share with us the cold well, I work for the candidates, he public schools.

Today we're talking with Stephanie Casa lack at CPS has led mental health and wellness specialist.

>> Bethany hails from Buffalo bills she attended Sini janessa so from her undergraduate degree in psychology and earned her master's and certificate of advanced study in school psychology at Alfred University she began her career as a school psychologist enough CPS

14 years ago initially Bethany worked at the elementary age students it haleigh and book now elementary,

she spent 8 years working at West Potomac high school to gain experience, the middle school level.

Bethany began the 2019 2020 school year it

Poe middle school and moved into her current role

as the mental health and wellness specialist on March 13th remember that's the days schools closed due to covid

doesn't he has always had a passion for promoting wellness to student engagement.

Well, a buck now and West Potomac.

She facilitated the book no West Potomac peer mentoring program

which engaged up to a 120 students each year

in a positive after school program that focused on building relationships at West Potomac.

She also initiated

the student ambassador program

and the our minds matter programs.

That's the work closely with student leadership classes, it was but MC to support wellness and positive school culture she piloted our minds matter at the first Middle School

in CPS while she was she's a youth

mental health first aid and a teen mental health first aid trainer has trained over 200 staff students and community members

to support them and becoming mental health first responders

that's a nice excited to support County wide initiatives

to prepare and wellness for all students and if CPS

I'm glad you're here and I'm very excited to be here.

Thank you for having me Lou say thank you so much.

Well we're getting ready for scps is virtual start to school.

It's just a few days away and this is a big change for students.

Some of them miss their friends and of course they miss their fall routines

and for parents who had to make plans and arrangements around their children's education,

in some ways it may not have been such a big deal.

But for other families it's been disruption knots can be accompanied by anxiety of facing the unknown,

as to when kids since students and parents and families and all of us

might be back in the buildings so I was thinking what sort of suggestions, given your background do you have for parents and students.

While they're preparing for their first days in first weeks of school.

>> That is a really wonderful question I as I think about that this will be the first year since I was 5 years old that I'm not stepping in a school the first. So I think it's a change for educators and families and students and it's OK to be worried and frustrated or anxious. This is just a really really big change for everyone. I have a few thoughts on things for parents to remember in for some students to really I think the first thing is that our kids are watching us right so they're watching our reactions there watching how we cope with how we're feeling and I think that's really important because if we respond outwardly with anger and anxiety they see that right, it's OK to some degree if it's developmentally appropriate to have those conversations but what I think is really important is to for them to see how we respond right so if we're if we're angry what are what coping skills are we using and and how are we managing that anger in an appropriate way because that's what they're going to learn right. I think about you know my mom cried when she was happy angry said mad Ray and then I've learned to do that to do so we really want to model what's best for our kids and and how to cope with different feelings. Thinking about what are my self-help strategies what am I doing to take care of myself and that my child sees that we talk a lot about self-care but what does that mean what did he do that we'll have cares tricky self-care is different for everybody and and so for some it's exercise healthy diet. Because our our mental wellness is connected to our physical wellness right absolutely but but thinking of what works for me it does does adult coloring help from a does reading taking a walk playing with my pet. It's okay if those strategies don't work but continually searching for what does work for you. So I just encourage people to look at what others are doing talk to your friends and family members what makes you feel a little less stress or a little bit better when you're struggling with your emotions, some try. The sides you know maybe in my case eating out box of cookies that.

>> Anyway.  
You know, and that's one of the things I want to talk about was this is a big change and change is not always easy. Change does provide opportunities, but it's not always easy how to you encourage people you work with and students she worked with over the years to maybe not embrace change but except change and then maybe eventually try to embrace it.

>> What are your thoughts.  
Yeah, I think the change is hard for everybody like you said. I when I'm thinking specifically of the start to the school year. So you said right where a few a few days away from the start of some so because this is different starting some of those routines right now tomorrow morning.

So that we're starting to prepare for the weeks to come  
and for students that looks like preparing your daily schedule, renewing your sleep  
routine  
right so naps are okay in moderation, but it's important to have that sleep schedule  
back on track and getting up at a certain time and  
if you wait till the first day of school that's going to be really challenging doing  
things like making that routine throughout the day and planning how am I going to  
have movement break some time away from the screen because that's a huge change for  
all of us so really planning ahead so that when we get to that point and you are  
having screen fatigue you can step away for a minute.  
Go for a walk and and really  
just trying your best having forgiveness for each other too because we know this is  
going to be a learning experience for the teachers for the parents and for the  
students  
that's right.  
>> And when you think about things in your own life that have changed in  
the ways that you sort of had to cope with that I think when  
the schools closed back in March that was such a sudden change for everyone people  
are sort of just  
no they they didn't know what to do he and there's a lot of fears well.  
How do you think the fall will be different as far as  
stepping into this new situation that won't be like the spring was.  
>> Well I think in the fall, yet there there are a lot of things that have been  
prepared over the summer so when school shut down in March, it was a surprise for a  
lot of us  
for most of us and absolutely we have  
had the summer where staff has been preparing.  
Just to come back and how we're going to learn in a virtual environment.  
One of the things that I think will be really wonderful is.  
Staff over the summer prepared some trainings for instructional staff that will  
focus on  
on social emotional learning and building relationships through  
the computer that is a challenge in itself  
and we are really focusing on putting that first we want our our staff and families  
to feel connected with each other, so I think having that  
as that our first role and  
goal for the school year is a big shift.  
Here's a taste of that what does that look like well, I think that one of the some  
of the new trainings that have developed  
that developed for instructional staff a look at what are some things you can do to  
build relationships.  
I know that teachers are  
creating welcome good videos and that kids and family start to see faces.  
I've seen teachers having.  
Conferences in meet and greets with families already and students and really  
starting to learn their what their families and students are like phone calls  
outreach to those families  
and then the silly things like  
engaging in conversations through flip board and breakout groups during instructions  
said that there can still be engagement but from a distance.

It's so really it sounds like it's a lot of creativity.  
A good part of the teachers in your teen, I think that is  
a really good way to put it it's a lot of creativity.  
This is not what anyone signed up for right now and teachers didn't go to school  
learning how to do all of this.  
And so this is a huge learning curve and I think that they are doing in its  
outstanding job I've seen some really great things being shared through social media  
specially.

>> Yeah, there's really no handbook to look at.  
You know we do have online education here that CPS  
but that's a small portion of student to this.  
Back a couple 1000 students.  
And now when you look at the number of students who are going to be online.  
It's quite daunting so  
when you think about and what you just spoke about a bit  
was the emotions and the emotions that people are going through what do you think we  
can anticipate and motions to look like.

>> I think if we're trying to anticipate that that can be a bit of a challenge  
because we have  
heard the word trauma lot not everything every family or student is going through a  
trauma right now this has been a crisis a global crisis for everybody.  
But some students are  
a little bit relieved because school has been a challenge for them to go into the  
building.  
So so there's some students that might react really positively to the online  
instruction.  
But we're also going to have students that  
are readjusting to learning and the requirements are more extensive now so there  
might be some anxiety about that there might be some  
fear of what what things are going to be to look like and I really encourage  
for our younger students or older students to have those conversations with your  
teachers in advance they want to know so that they can have an awareness and and  
work with each student differently.  
So that they can become more comfortable, we're not expecting a student to sit  
perfectly and learn every moment of the day sitting in front of a screen.  
It's going to be an adjustment miss we'll just take some time so  
we can expect that this will take time.

>> Trent has going to ask about what parents can do to help  
their kids in advance as far as those emotions and  
you know how what kind of conversation should parents be having to prepare their  
children at any age.

>> I'm always a big fan of conversations that you know open ended questions are  
huge rather than.  
Those questions words like  
did you have a good day, yes, or no right we need to have those questions that are  
the why the who I call them the WH questions  
and doing it in at a time frame when  
nobody is at a peak feeling a peak of motion.  
So if somebody is very angry or upset about something it's not usually the best time  
to have those pre planning conversations

finding a time when everybody's kind of relaxed and how are you feeling about the start of school trying not to give your opinion so one of my favorite things that I've learned in youth mental health first aid is listening non-judgmental e that's really hard. It especially for adults because we do not know what our kids are going through we we're we were kids living through this environment. So listening hearing what they have to say not giving examples of our own experiences really letting them talk to us and just validating how they're feeling but then talking if it's an emotion that's a little bit less positive or create some stress talking about OK, what are we can do tend to help you feel a little bit more comfortable with the school here or what are you looking forward to because there's hopefully something that they're looking forward to so focusing some on some of the positive as well. Do you think parents can look for those things that might be suggestions. Maybe students don't know what they're looking forward to maybe they just don't have an idea how could appear help yeah I think if you're struggling for those things some examples would be is there, anybody you're excited to see and know in if you get that that grand jury that silence OK, what about your teacher you what do you think this teachers like did you hear anything about your teacher last year if you when you were at school which friends are you excited to be in contact with what are some of the games are things that you do online that that you enjoy I thing for our younger kids I think of the go noodle activities and and I've heard a lot of them working in the schools and being surrounded by teachers and finding out what their favorite go noodle activity is because those provide some really good movement breaks. That's a great idea because a lot of parents don't know how to start these conversations, it's so helpful Bethany.

>> You mention mental health first aid and in the introduction we talked a bit about it.

>> A lot of listeners probably don't know what that is can we talk about that for a few minutes, absolutely I'm glad you brought that up that is one of my favorite favorite courses to teach mostly because it is something that can be offered to parents community members and staff members. And it where we're learning that is now in a virtual environment which I'm really excited about it used to be an 8 hour all day course a broken up between 2 days. But you're it's like medical first aid where you're learning ABC right, the action steps when you're worried about somebodys physical safety with mental health first aid you're looking at what are some warning signs or signs that somebody might be in a crisis and what are the first steps that we take to support a U.S. it is it's just positive reviews because it brings up so many questions there's a lot of engagement with the other members of the class and I really enjoy when the teachers and community members are mixed because they can get different perspectives from their classmates as well.

How does somebody know about this or how to sign up.

Well so that great question is well, it's

a little bit different because we're in a virtual environment, but I would be that point of contact.

You can email me and let the teachers or parents who are both and so I've had school staff

that.

So our trainers are getting trained in the virtual platform, currently so it's not started yet.

But we will have course offerings and sometimes it's an administrator will reach out and ask for it to be scheduled or a PTA might ask for that to be scheduled.

So.

It's it's good to get groups that are interested to contact me through e-mail

I've heard of that before and I've heard really really good things about it.

>> In different media areas and things like that and

with people who are trainers in who are involved in the mental health field,

a lot of times though you say the word mental health and people can shut down.

So people might be of

trade to take a course like that because they think whole the problem is not that serious role,

you know they just need a change of scenery and everything will be better.

What is mental health first aid say about.

>> That is one of the goals of the course is to reduce the stigma associated with mental health and

I think

the youth today are getting much better about that and they have a better understanding of that there's less of a stigma revolving around mental health, it's it's

harder for some of the adult son.

The reality is between one 4, 1, in 5 use

experience a mental health challenge by the time, they're 18 that that's a lot of our stuff our students right and so we have to start having conversations open and honest conversations about mental health.

What we're doing to take care of it.

I think

also being cautious and mindful about the language we use when we're talking about mental health,

not using terms like crazy or coo coo things that can be really offensive

or using a diagnosis as a liberal for somebodys motions so been mindful of those things but really the conversations in and educating yourself and others.

>> Will he talk about when people are close to you and they want to talk in and you don't know what to say or how to react in.

You talk about making sure you're seeing new the right thing that's what mental health first aid does

for those who haven't taken the course and may not be able to for a little while, but yet there

with there either

adult children or school age children,

or any family or member friend, whoever, they're sort of

close to right now in these limited circumstances,

but they see that person might be watching a little too much news or maybe his really triggered by some of the violence if they're seen taking place in cities around the country and they feel anxiety or anger fear. How can someone support a person who are very close to him they care about how can they support him through that.

>> Well I that that's a good question you covered a lot that we see I think the first thing I would suggest is if you're becoming overwhelmed by the news and social media, it's OK to shut off it really is OK, it's it's something that we need to do to take care of ourselves. More importantly in general whether it's stressors related to our current environment, social and racial injustice is any of those things or just a mental health challenge listening to our friends or family. I loved ones reassuring them that there is help if we need it and there are everybody can achieve wellness and with the right supports whether it's the right self-help strategies or getting support outside in the community and we have a lot of those options still available even though some of them might be a through a virtual platform. I was I was reading something today that a friend had posted talking about if I'm recommending that you maybe consider seeing somebody it's not me trying to hurt your feelings are saying there's a problem, it's me saying you deserve to have somebody to confide in that will keep things confidential and have an unbiased be an unbiased listener for you it's not meant to be an offensive recommendation and I really like that because it's really to offer that hope and support.

>> And you talked about some of the clubs in the schools that talk about this tell us about some of those clubs and will those clubs be available this fall.

>> Great questions so I know that we're working on our all of the logistics. One of my my very favorite club supporting mental health said in trying to reduce the stigma associated with that is our minds matter. Nearly all of our high schools and now a couple of our middle schools have this club. Our minds matter has done leadership training for the virtual platform with the sponsors and the student leaders they've had wonderful turnouts kids are excited for this they're really looking forward to virtual club meetings and and talking about what kind of wellness activities they can offer their school community even in a virtual environment. So that is extremely exciting and any student can join whether you are experiencing a mental health challenges, you are close to people who are experiencing a challenge or if you just want to support those who are in that situation or just promote

wellness, it is and a great opportunity for anyone.

In general, I think any club or activity that a student can become associated with is really really great.

I know schools are some schools are offering different clubs and activities fares that will be virtual.

It just can access in a different way and I know it's not the same as being in person, but it's still a social connection and that is a protective factor for our youth.

>> Absolutely and I'm assuming that the schools will be posting all that information on the club sandwich clubs are available.

>> And if they don't have one of those clubs, what should they do if they don't have one of those clubs they can look up our minds matter online the contact information is there I can be contacted in

and put them in touch with the right people and that's the beauty of this our minds matter is meant to be student led we want students taking the lead on this so if they're interested or if they're not sure if their school has one.

They can ask in their student services office they could reach out to mean there's there's lots of different ways to find out.

That's also what about student voice

and before earlier today you and I were talking about that.

I help everybody he's might be listening understand what that is student voice is a great online platform that you know we're really trying to promote for students to share their stories whether it's about

kind of how they've overcome something challenging our resiliency or their own experience with mental health really it can be anything it can be art work.

It can be us it can be a video post it could be poetry we've seen some students share that we want to hear from the students because you and I can sit here and talk but we know the students like to hear each other so and so do I that's that's my main goal so we would love more information from our students

they could go to the Fairfax County public schools website and just search student voice and it would pop up,

how often are they posted the new passages, Tina.

I know when we get them they the turnaround and posting is relatively quick if there's a lot of them really it's a little bit longer but they do get posted relatively quickly to better start talking about that and have some more people know about it so they can send

and even parents who might be listening talk to your child about making his submission to student voice that wonderful.

We don't have a lot of time left.

>> But I want you to tell us about how old some exciting news with the upcoming mental health and wellness conference coming in Sept  
timber, I believe September yes, I'm so excited about this.

We.

>> Are hosting the 7th annual wellness Caen France where we partner with Nova and Kaiser Permanente

and they the I know the side of things sponsors the act on addiction.

So there's a lot of talk about substance abuse prevent or prevent substance use prevention.

But also our speakers are going to be focusing on resiliency so we have 3 weeks of

evening.

Presentations that will be occurring you can register online with just posted the registration yesterday.

We have Joseph Williams coming from the University of Virginia speaking on how talking to your child about race and racism promote social awareness.

We have Melissa Schlanger from Castle

and she's going to be talking to parents about how to bring social emotional learning into the home

can drive which is the director of resilience and positive psychology at U Penn and she's going to be talking about fostering resiliency

and we have Ellen Dodge from Comeau cheese who will be talking about how to have conversations about feelings with your children.

So it sounds like a wonderful conference it's going to be wonderful please please sign up its virtual it's free to attend and the sessions will be recorded so if you can't attend when it is on you can do that.

One other thing there's a student Strand.

So our minds matter is far

facilitating that with any student who wants to sign up they'll have 2 different sessions offered throughout those 3 weeks.

This is for the the youth as well,

wonderful how did you decide on that theme resilience.

You know I I really thought about this and we started thinking about it the start of the shutdown and there are a lot of hard things but resilience means that we can get through those hard things and through even stronger

and and that's why I wanted to be that focus I want us to focus on

all of us coming through a challenging situation and and being able to cope with hard things

that's right and I know we talk a lot about rumination.

>> And how people can dwell on something and so we'll have to find strategies in ways that we won't do that in hopefully.

Parents can take some of the advice that you shared

and learn about how they can help their students because sometimes students in young people just don't know so it's one of those things that parents can pack in their own tool box.

So they can help their children

in in you don't want to wait until something

sad happens in your life or some emotional comes across let's just be prepared like we do anything with a bicycle helmet or a seat belt that

the protective strategies, you're talking about work

and we can all help each other especially now

with everything that's been going on so before we let you go is a quick 3 question.

Quiz, I'm going to ask you

was your favorite teacher and why.

>> I've been asked this question before and 2 teachers always come to mind that was my second grade teacher Mrs.

Cruickshank and then my calculus teacher Mister Moran,

and so they're 2 very different stages of my life, but the thing they had in common is they were my trusted adults when the hard things happened right so I think that's the one thing that binds them together.

Wonderful yeah, which do you prefer cake or pie.

I have a strict rule that I don't like fruit to be in my dessert think it is today and it needs to be

left as a that peach crisp oh gosh now now now, I mean maybe about yes, cake or pie as long as they could the fruit stays out of it interesting and finally what's the career accomplishment.

You are most proud of

you know I would have to say it is every time I get an e-mail from a student that is just I graduated and doing well I finished college, I started a job, I love love getting those messages.

So it's it's the small things so always always think those people that have done those things for you.

>> I love that thank you and that makes me want to thank you and thank everybody who's listening.

Thank you for joining us, Bethany Casa lack and hopefully everybody got some great information on things you can do

to help your children not only in these first weeks of school but as he continues through this very unprecedented unusual time that we're getting ready to head into.

>> Thank you for having me today this is sure if you have a topic he'd like to suggest a healthy minds podcast let us know send your suggestions to healthy mind if CPS dot edu.