

Interview on COVID-19 response with Sister Beth, a provider

My name is Brittany and I would like to welcome you back to Rising from the Ashes Trauma Talks, a podcast series brought to you by the UB School of Social Works' the Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care. Our trauma talk series provides a platform for people who have worked with in the field of trauma as well as those who have experienced trauma to share their witness of how strength and resiliency have allowed themselves and others to rise from the ashes of adversity. Today I have the pleasure of being joined by Sister Beth Nirupam, who is currently a social worker with Jericho Road Community Health Center. Sister Beth earned her MSW from the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. She also belongs to the National Association of Social Workers and as a Franciscan sister with the Catholic Church prior to her current work in the field, Sister Beth worked as a teacher for years and is still remaining actively engaged with volunteer work in her local community. Beth can you tell me a little bit about the capacity in which you're interacting with survivors of trauma?

0:59 Sister Beth: Well in normal circumstances I mean there are three days a week and a shelter that takes care of asylum seekers that are trying to get into the United States, or trying to get through the Canadian border. Right now, because of this situation that we're in, I was told not to go in since we are in a high-risk group of people that have been traveling all over the world. So as of March 16th, I was asked not to come in because of this situation with a virus so they have completely changed how staffing is reporting to the agency. Right now, based upon the epidemic I believe that's correct.

1:43 Brittany: So, can you tell me a little bit about how you've managed that? I know you must be very connected to the work that you do and being in this collective trauma that we're in right now of COVID-19, what is it that helps you to continue in your role even from a distance?

1:57 Sister Beth: Well, like even today I just texted my boss who runs the shelter and asked her how things were going and if there was anything or anyone, I needed to call to give them some support through this we had a few people that had difficulty moving into the shelter and adjusting to it. And I was just trying to help by phone if I could to alleviate any kind of stress that might come with this dilemma of being in this shelter with all this around them. So, that was one thing I do try to phone the people that I'm associated with or had been associated with to see where they're at. That's about all I can do from afar because of just the situation that we're in.

2:47 Brittany: So, it sounds like what you're describing is that you're really doing your best to stay connected with people that you've built some pretty important relationships where through your work at the shelter.

2:56 Sister Beth: Yeah and some of them - I have to say, it's some of the previous people that have left the shelter that are now living on their own, and we're trying to get adjusted to the

situation... you know becoming just a member of society here, and that's been a challenge for them because they're finding that their jobs... they don't have jobs because of obviously the dilemma of not working... that's another piece I've been trying to keep in touch with those people as well.

3:26 Brittany: Wow, so it sounds like as you're describing some of this - that really, you're talking about some of the central aspects of trauma-informed care so stopping this asking the question of what is wrong with someone and moving towards what has happened to them. Doctors Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris have pioneered some seminal research about the implementation of trauma-informed care and in doing so they've identified these five guiding principles of trust, safety, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. So, as you were talking, what I heard over and over again was that people trust you and that you take this to heart in a very meaningful way. Can you tell me more about how trust plays a part in your role?

4:08 Sister Beth: When... just what you've noticed is working to help maintain this trust and an uncertain time like this, it takes time to build up trust from the particular population that I work with since most of the people have come from situations where friends and neighbors have turned them in and brings great pain. It takes a while but. I've had that opportunity prior to this situation so that was a blessing. So, I feel that basically when they even move out of, vivre a that's the name of the shelter, that they use us as kind of their family because they don't really have family close to them or in this particular situation. So, to keep some kind of a semblance of connection of community of belonging I try to do that. So, I feel that's a key part of my role here is to continue to support them whether they're presently living there or even beyond. So, that's another piece that has happened because I've been getting calls from people that you know, don't have food or where can I get food? So, I continually try to help them you know find those and I've been in the system long enough to be able to find those and point to them close to where they live or I have the resources or the computer so I can help them find resources. So, I find that basically what I'm doing...

5:41 Brittany: What an incredible source of just solace and assistance. It sounds like you these must be people who have survived some pretty horrific trauma in their lives.

5:51 Sister Beth: Yes, that's basically it you know... they all come from war-torn countries or a lot of messes in their government you know so... yeah, it's a variety of things but basically their lives have been turned upside down.

6:07 Brittany: How scary that must be... but how great that you're able to be... be there for them and to be supportive in this difficult time. As we continue to think about these guiding principles, I'd like to just continue to explore how they connect as tools for providers and systems of care especially in this era again of COVID-19. Beginning with trust as you and I just discussed but maybe moving on to safety, it sounds like safety is something that has been pretty

drastically interrupted for many of the people that you work with. Recurring in your role, how do you Establish a sense of emotional safety not only for the people that you work with but also for yourself?

6:48 Sister Beth: Well it's a challenge I think for both for the people. I think it's a challenge because like I said, they don't have anyone else... so, to try to keep connected to them is important. The way I take care of myself... I'm very blessed to be a part of a community of religious women and we support one another in the work that we do, which has the majority of its service to people in need. So, we all have different roles and jobs but we share with one another to support each other, so that's a real plus for me. And I don't think in this virus that many people are sitting home alone, or single to say the least, because we're not... we live in community so it makes a huge difference to the people or to myself and... and that's a key, I think for my survival and keeping myself together while you're trying to help a group of people that are really broken. And it is a challenge, there is no question about it. I have to step back often and say you know where am I in this? and how... what are my feelings? and how do I cope with his situation that we're facing? So, it's a juggle... it's a, you know, balancing act. We're all learning and walking this together.

8:20 Brittany: I believe this is so beautifully said, and I think that you hit so elegantly on this idea of collaboration as well. As you know, collaboration is something that can facilitate healing through relationships and it also just exemplifies the importance of this principle when we're working with survivors of trauma as you mentioned, not only for their trauma survivors themselves, but also as caregivers and as providers. What do you notice has been meaningful or important about this time of physical distancing? What do you think is the most important for a community to remain strong? it's connecting? How you do that?

8:58 Sister Beth: I do think it is important. Especially, to do it, we can talk about it and say oh we should... we should, but if you don't do it and it's just words... then that's not gonna help anybody. But it's more frustrating to you, so if you can find a simple easy way of communicating with someone, whether it's picking up the phone or writing a note to someone that might need it, or contacting someone maybe that you haven't spoken with in a while... I think all of those are simple means that one can reach out and connect with a neighbor or a friend and again it might be a little risky but I think at this time it's a good time to try it and to help those that need it the most.

9:48 Brittany: That is so important at this time and I think that when you first started talking about how you remain connected with people, even at a distance, who are currently residing at the shelter what have you noticed is working about that?

10:02 Sister Beth: I like to think that they just appreciate here in a different voice and you know, they can complain and we laugh about it or you know something funny... some little thing will be working them and you know they could say, 'oh this is driving me crazy' and you know kind of go on with their life. You know, it's when you bottle it all up and it pops out like a volcano that nobody around you wants to be around you and, and nothing good comes usually out of it. So, you know in this kind of a crisis situation if you could stay a little with the humor, I think it goes a long way. I think that is such a critical piece here and remembering too that even in this scary pandemic where a lot of us don't know what is happening from day to day and things change very suddenly, that you can keep a little bit of your... your humaneness and some of that humor and things that just keep us all going even on tough days that are outside of the current circumstances that we're in.

11:08 Brittany: Right I agree with you wholeheartedly.

11:09 Sister Beth: Because crisis is a part of life. However, what we do with that makes us better people or it can be the opposite it can make you more harsh, and you can be, you know, harder on others as well as yourself. So, if you can be a little less critical of yourself and kind of join in the human race for a while and see that life can go on. And I think that's the big thing, that there is hope in the end of this, and that we'll walk the walk together. You're not alone. That that's the scariest part of this, I think, when people start talking about it that's what you hear... the fear that comes and fear can break people. I think the big thing is if we can stay positive as difficult as that might be, you know, people have gone through many things in their lives and they've made it through. So, I think it's just a matter of having a great deal of peace and that comes with growth, and talking to yourself sometimes and giving yourself a break and in others, and just trying to make a purposeful life.

12:23 Brittany: I am just so taken aback by the amount of insight that you have about how all of this can really just be taken in stride, and sometimes I know that must be difficult to practice but it sounds like maintaining this positivity is very important to you and something that you have found to be very empowering in your work.

12:42 Sister Beth: Mmm-hmm, oh yeah. I mean if you can give someone... I mean it all comes down to having a decent amount of hope and that's sometimes hard to do. But if you can make it and maintain it in some way, that's the trick. You've read any of the documents from wars and other epidemics, people have hope and that they're working together. Those are the key factors

13: 11 Brittany: I think that coming forward, as you reflect on it so in that... that idea of hope and collaboration when you think about being in COVID-19, so many of us have found ourselves feeling powerless and uncertain about what we can do right now. How we can participate? How we can help each other? How have you managed to empower clients and even colleagues and

people that you are close to during this time? To move through some of these feelings of powerlessness that come up when it might be a little bit more difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel?

13:47 Sister Beth: I think it's because I tend to have a positive attitude. I think that's a blessing given to me by my parents. I can't own it myself, and I think the only way we can help each other basically is to be open... be honest, and you know help each other walk through this time whatever that means, however that means, however you express that. I think that's the key there's no set formula... you have to kind of work it through yourself. It's a good time to sit back and self-reflect a little bit and say you know, where am I? Am I in this? And how can I grow? What does it mean to me? How can I reach out to someone else? Or am I going to sit here and wallow in this kind of a situation and let my life pass me by I think those are the choices that you have, but you have to be able to reflect a little bit and give yourself some time and look at the situation as best you can.

14:56 Brittany: It sounds like recognizing that there is some choice and how you go about conducting yourself and working with others and being collaborative and helping to empower those around you... that choice really is a critical component of these relationships and also, as you know, it's an important piece of trauma-informed care and building a trauma-informed culture as well. As we grapple with COVID-19, and the many implications of this time in our lives, what choices has your workplace setting offered you as this pandemic is unfolded?

15:27 Sister Beth: I think the freedom to not be there, that was a gift. And I appreciate that gift. I think that other people don't have that freedom... some have to go to work so, I guess that's the biggest thing for myself. As far as the people, I do wish that I could be more present to them, but what I'm trying to do is be as supportive as I can to the people that are still there and... and trying to do the work that our office is assigned to do, especially during this time.

16:07 Brittany: It sounds like in that, and you being able to make the choice to stay home and to stay safe, that not only was physical safety prioritized, but also, you're able to offer some emotional safety to your co-workers as you are able to be fully present to them.

16:25 Sister Beth: Correct. Yeah that's what I was trying to do. You know, I've been trying to do and again I was trying not to be in their way... but you know, helping them along the way... basically you know, just as a support, you know, in the best way I could do at this distance and...

16:42 Brittany: What do you think that choice and giving choices sends to the clients and people that you serve, and how has that allowed for them to maybe rise from the ashes of adverse or adversity? And particularly the adversity that we face at this time... so you mentioned that many of these people have endured unthinkable traumas and tragedy in their lives, and now

living in the time where physical health and safety are really at the front of our minds... What sorts of choices do people have that may help to empower them?

17:13 Sister Beth: First of all, they have to be able to make the choice. They made the choice to come to this country for whatever reason, so it's a relief to be here, I think, but at the same time with this situation that we're all facing, it's a challenge because they thought they'd be free and now they're basically locked up in a dorm of some sort trying to maintain their dream and that's one of the frustrations I think I've been hearing is that, you know everything stopped. The courts have stopped. Supposed dates that they were supposed to go to court, that's been stopped. All their cases are stopped. So, you know just one thing after the other that they've had to readjust to... and the fact that everything's going to take longer. And it's already was at a terrible standstill. So, that's a real heartache I have to say for them, and I suffer with them in that sense you know, that they have to be waiting so many months and years and days before they can get their cases heard.

18:20 Brittany: What an incredible disruption to such a significant time in people's lives when they're working with you and working with Jericho Road. It's just really incredible that you are able to help them it sounds like to recognize some resilience and all of this...

18:33 Sister Beth: Yeah, they really are very resilient. They're very marvelous people... I mean they, they, have such a gift of a lot of patience, more than I think Americans have in general. They're living in limbo. There's no other place to call... it, it's just in that in between time. So, it's a difficult time no matter if they were trying to find their answer to all their questions and get their legal things straightened around. But having this whole dilemma of another wait. Why? Because you know, we're in this crisis... So, it's a difficult time there. There's no question about it.

19:17 Brittany: So, as we touch on each of these principles and how you encounter them in your everyday work, I'm just so struck by the amount of positivity that you're able to bring to your work and just your availability to be a true resource for the people that need you. Not only emotionally, but also in ways of getting their needs met and just feeling maybe a little less alone in all of this. But I'm wondering what impacts are you noticing of this pandemic on people's overall wellness?

19:45 Sister Beth: Even, you know, people not living in the situation that they're in as far as the people that have left the center and they've called me and we are trying to support them... So, it's a little bit of anxiety obviously. And trying to work through what can I do? How do I maintain myself? How do I get resources? But they're doing it a graceful way I would say. But also, they don't know what's next and I think that's what's so hard. So, my big thing is you know, one day at

a time -- baby steps. Don't be jumping into you know, this that and the other thing. Take you know, just live the now and try to be as positive as you can and we'll go from there.

20:35 Brittany: Absolutely, and there's no doubt that as you described that this has just had a profound disruption that can really be pretty traumatic for many if not most of us. So, here we are noticing that even in the midst of all this that we can still make meaning from and emerge from these experiences may be more resilient and even stronger than ever before. And in what ways have you found personally that maybe you've become more resilient and maybe grown even in your own role and just grown as a provider, a social worker, as this pandemic has unfolded?

21:10 Sister Beth: I think I've just been able to sit back and not be in the middle of the dilemma. I mean, in the middle of the crisis, in the sense of not in the frontlines of administering any kind of hospital care which, I think, is so challenging at this time. So, that's a blessing and it's basically just trying to continue to look at the positive.

21:38 Brittany: I'm kind of at a loss for words, I think and I... think that that is the word that seems to be the theme of our time together today is just positivity empowerment and looking maybe looking for the brighter side of things and I think that's just a really a really incredible thing that you bring to the work that you do every day.

21:55 Sister Beth: Well thank you!

21:59 Brittany: Absolutely. And our time together draws to a close here. I again, I'm just so struck by the creativity and the strength and the resourcefulness that it sounds like... that you've really employed during this difficult time. I'm wondering if maybe you can just offer a few final words. What stands out to you as the most profound reasons of why trauma-informed care right now is particular, is crucial in this time?

22:25 Sister Beth: What to me trauma-informed care means, is that you bring your best to the situation and if we can as professionals try to support those that might have severe needs, or are in difficult situations at this time, be more supportive... if we can... or at least give some kind of hope in the midst of this. That really is our job. They will... they will shine when they need to. They will come forth they will help each other, but I think that's the key that we can do is continue to be as supportive, open, and willing to take risks, but in a positive way, for people. I think that would be my hope.

23:15 Brittany: Thank you so much for that. I think that was such a beautiful and succinct way to really wrap up all of these important topics that you have brought up today.

23:24 Sister Beth: Well thank you, and may you have a blessed day.

23:28 Brittany: Thank you. And on behalf of the Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today and to just share your witness of strength and resiliency. It has been a true pleasure.

23:39 Sister Beth: Good. Thank you for the opportunity!