

## Interview on COVID-19 response with Meagan, a provider/survivor

Hi my name is Whitney. Welcome to Rising from the Ashes Trauma Talks, a podcast series brought to you by the University at Buffalo School of Social work's the Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care. Our trauma talk series provides a platform for people who've worked within 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'm joined by Meagan Corrado who is a licensed clinical social worker, a practicing trauma therapist, a full-time faculty member at [muffled] College and the owner and creator of stories. Meagan were so grateful that you've taken the time to share your story with us today and I'm wondering if you may be able to begin by telling us a little bit about the capacity in which you are interacting with trauma survivors?

**0:59 Meagan:** Sure. So, first off, I think it's helpful for people to know that I am myself a survivor of complex trauma, so in the course of me learning about trauma (I'm academically and professionally) I also realized somewhere in the course of reading all these different things and learning about trauma that I was also a survivor of complex trauma. So, in addition to my own trauma experiences, I also provide support to individual groups and also systems who've experienced trauma as well, and I work with people who've experienced trauma in various capacities so I work with them clinically. I also have also been engaging in a lot of macro Social Work practice where I'm providing supports of communities and larger systems as they try to identify, like healthy ways they have trauma-informed policies procedures and even, like, designing the physical environments so that it's conducive to trauma-informed practices.

**1:55 Whitney:** Wow thank you so much for your candor about your own trauma history. I really appreciate the courage it takes to share that and as you describe your interactions with trauma and trauma-informed approaches at many different levels, I am reminded that on the macro level that you just mentioned we're all sort of in the midst of a collective ongoing trauma and you know, as I talk to you right now, we're right in the middle of COVID-19. And how providers are responding matters so tremendously so I'm wondering how it is that even in the face of all of this disruption and uncertainty you have managed to continue in the many roles in which you interface with trauma?

**2:44 Meagan:** So, to be honest, I've been asked like how do you navigate stress in the midst of COVID-19, for me the way that I've responded is saying trauma adversity, stress, chronic stress, is nothing new. Many communities, individuals, populations, have been navigating through high levels of stress and trauma throughout their lives. So, for me because I am a survivor of complex trauma, I know that there are particular strategies that worked for me when things get particularly escalated as it relates to stress, and I'm kind of going back to the same things that have always worked for me. So, while things are particularly stressful now, and we're collectively

experiencing even higher levels of stress on top of stress that we've already experienced, I find that the same things that worked for me in other situations of trauma are working for me now. So, being creative, figuring out ways to artistically express myself, identifying healthy people to connect with and to receive support from also, like looking at the messages that I'm telling myself. So, often times when we're experiencing stress crises and trauma we engage in like, really unhealthy negative self-talk... so, kind of like checking myself in those moments where I'm feeling like I'm not doing enough or not being as productive as I should be... So, those are kind of my go-to strategies anyway, and I've absolutely been using them.

**4:13 Whitney:** The insight you've gleaned about yourself through your experiences and your ability to access what you have in your toolbox so readily is truly remarkable. And as you described this, I hear some central aspects of trauma-informed care emerging in our conversation already. You know, feeling empowered with knowledge of what helps you persevere and creating safety for yourself in trying times. So, for our, listeners who may be unfamiliar, trauma-informed care invites us all to stop asking what is wrong with the person and moves us toward considering what has happened to the person. Doctors Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris have pioneered some seminal research about the implementation of trauma-informed care, and in doing so, have identified the frameworks five guiding principles as safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. So, together we are going to explore how these principles, which can act as tools for providers and systems of care alike, have shaped and continue to shape your work in the era of COVID-19. Beginning with physical and psychological safety, I'm wondering in addition to recalling and reaching for the go-to coping tools you just described, how do you establish your own sense of psychological safety? And how is that useful to you as you continue in your work?

**5:45 Meagan:** So, I think that it's really important for us to think about the messages that we're telling ourselves as we seek to establish psychological safety for ourselves. Many of us are speaking to ourselves in really abrasive ways -- ways that we would never speak to other people who've experienced trauma... but we're speaking to ourselves in those ways we're conveying really shaming messages to ourselves. We're speaking to ourselves in a in an abrasive in a negative tone of voice, and I think it's really important for us, and I constantly have to check myself on this as well. I'm like, would I actually talked to another person who I'm working with in this tone of voice when I convey these types of negative messages to someone that I'm providing supports who's been through trauma and in a lot of cases I say no, I would not speak to them that way. So why am I speaking to myself in that same tone of voice and with that same level of criticism? Another thing that I have within the past year – I... I've been exposed to the work of Janina Fisher and internal family systems theory, and it's been incredible as a way to provide support to myself in accepting the various parts of myself. So, Janina Fisher wrote a book called "Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors," and she talks about how all

of us have like different parts of ourselves and often times when we see that there are parts of ourselves that we don't necessarily like -- parts of ourselves that like we wish we could change -- often times we like scare those parts of ourselves into shame. It's really important for us to develop a healthier view and to figure out the needs of those parts -- and in filling every part of ourselves, is there for a reason? And has it helped us to survive various overwhelming and difficult circumstances? So, instead of shaming the parts of ourselves that we don't like -- if we come to a place where we can welcome them and also acknowledge their adaptive survivor role in helping us to continue forward, then we can also experience a more internal sense of calm and acceptance. And then one more thing I want to add... so there's a theorist named Winnicott. I'm always talking about Winnicott because he said some very profound things... but he talks about this concept of the good enough caregiver and he says that you don't have to be perfect as a caregiver in order to provide support in order for a child to grow and thrive, but you have to be good enough. And I think about that concept as it relates to my role as a helping professional and I also think of it when I have these negative self-messages that I'm conveying to myself. The message is saying I have to be perfect, that I have to get everything right all the time and I also kind of tell myself 'no you're good enough. Yes, you make mistakes. Yes, you don't handle things perfectly every time. But, you're good enough.

**8:31 Whitney:** Wow so rich and you know I'm reminded of the old adage attributed to Voltaire that reminds us not to let perfect be the enemy of good and that sounds really connected to that self-acceptance that you've described and I'm just struck by how reflective you are about how what we notice and think about ourselves can grow larger and as you talk about these profound things you're able to do for yourself. I just can't help but wonder what sort of new possibilities have emerged for you as a result of maintaining your psychological safety so you can be present for and help others access their own sense of safety while we weather this storm together.

**9:18 Meagan:** Safety is really like the foundational principle and providing supports anyone, whether the individual has experienced pervasive complex chronic trauma or not and some of the same principles that I seek to emphasize in my work with clients and my work with communities and systems are some of the same principles that I'm also trying to make sure that I'm implementing in myself. I'm not gonna say that I do it easily. I'm not gonna say that it's you know, all uphill. It's very much a roller coaster of figuring out healthy ways to maintain safety and stability and then other experiences where things don't quite go as planned and you have to like reflect and figure out how to move forward. Anyway, but supporting individual clients and communities in identifying their strengths is a really important part of safety. Also, assisting them in thinking of creative and innovative ways to overcome challenges -- that's something I do for myself and I also advocate for everyone that I work with to do as well. We can find, in like the creative arts, a voice for things that we don't have the words for, and we also can experience a sense of stability in the creative process that we might not necessarily have in the external world.

**10:36 Whitney:** I imagine that demonstrating trustworthiness on your part is a significant piece of the puzzle as you facilitate trauma survivors. Seeing these new creative avenues to tell their deeply personal stories perhaps for the first time. So, I am wondering what you've noticed working well to establish trust in your work now or in general?

**11:01 Meagan:** I think that the social work principle of meeting people where they are is really important so sometimes, like, it's like we know that we're supposed to meet people where they are but then when we actually encounter an individual, community, or a system we're not actually meeting them where they are -- we're meeting them where we want them to be. And I think that part of navigating the current stress and trauma in general is actually meeting the person where they are so that means meeting them in a place of distrust or meeting them in a place of skepticism or worry or fear, acknowledging and validating that and then supporting them slowly but surely and moving incrementally toward a place of trust. I think sometimes people think about trust as being something that you either have or you don't have and I think of trust as kind of being on a continuum. It's all about figuring out ways to build connection so that there is movement you might not move from 0 to 100 right away. You might move from 0 to 10 and then 10 to 20 20 to 30, but that's part of meeting people where they are and I don't think it's necessarily a realistic expectation for us to think that we're gonna immediately gain people's trust. Trust takes time, it takes effort, it takes us progressively connecting with people where they are and, in that moment, they might be in a place where they're overwhelmed. They have experienced betrayal. They've experienced fear. And we're meeting them in that betrayal. We're meeting them in that fear. And then sometimes it feels like we're not necessarily moving anywhere because sometimes when you're in the moment trying to establish and build that trust it feels like you're stuck, but often times when we're meeting people where they are -- where we're building relational connections with people, it might not feel like we're moving though. Then, we look back and we're like, oh you know we have moved. We're not where we were when we first started and we're continuing to develop this relationship together.

**12:51 Whitney:** Wow. That's a really beautiful way to encapsulate and think about that social work value, and as you're chatting with me about it, I just find myself wondering what sort of role does providing a sense of choice and control play as you work to meet people where they are and earn trauma survivors trust over time? So, how do you see the principle of choice manifest?

**13:19 Meagan:** In many rolls there is definitely a relationship between choice and freedom, and culturally we absolutely emphasize freedom and our current circumstances are limiting our sense of freedom, are limiting our sense of choice, and it's really requiring us to be creative in ways that we hadn't been before. So, not to say that I mean, I believe that every individual has the ability to be creative and to engage in creative processes, but the extent of creativity that has been required in the current state of our nation and internationally really has required us to tap

into sources of creativity that we might not have necessarily known that we had or we've had to amplify our pre-existing propensity to be creative in order to survive in order to cope with challenges. So, with the work that I do, I try to make sure that the individual whose experienced trauma has as many opportunities for choice and control as possible. In my stories trauma narrative intervention, I'm providing a framework to support people who've been through trauma and telling their narrative so they're looking at their strengths, they're looking at their challenges, they're organizing them, they're voicing their experiences through a creative medium they're reflecting on what they've been through. And then they're saying in light of everything, 'I've been through this, and this is where I want to go in the future.' So, there's nine different steps in my trauma narrative process and in each step the individual who's been through trauma is given the opportunity to make as many choices and to have as much control. This is really important whether or not you're using you know, the stories trauma narrative intervention or if you're just helping people tell their narratives in general. It's really important to provide people with as much opportunity for choice and control -- partially because trauma involves a sense of powerlessness but oftentimes trauma involves like an oppressor versus the oppressed dynamic, and you don't want to recreate that when you're providing support to trauma survivors, where while the person is also expressing what happened to them, you're also kind of taking the role of the oppressor by taking control of their narratives as well. So, I absolutely advocate for people to be able to have flexibility to express their narratives in the medium formats that make the most sense for them. For them to be able to use their voice in a way that makes sense for them, in a way that fully expresses who they are and where they want to go.

**15:43 Whitney:** I really appreciate that you are paying attention to how individual providers and organizations and systems can all sort of take on those oppressor roles. And, that's true even inadvertently and with the best of intentions, and you also really shone a spotlight a moment ago on how you can honor these stories by co-constructing hopeful visions of the future and I just wonder how at a time when the future is sort of uncertain and the ways that we connect with each other to herald that sort of creativity may have shifted a bit. How has collaboration facilitated uncovering and mobilizing strengths and stories in your work?

**16:34 Meagan:** So, collaboration is really essential not only in the current crisis, I know I keep saying this but I want to emphasize that you know the current... the current crisis that we're facing as well as trauma crisis stress that people are experiencing outside of this and in addition to this, we can't effectively support people in achieving change in processing their emotions and figuring out what they need if we're not meeting them where they are. And we're not allowing them to define for themselves how we can provide support and assistance to them. So, my clients are considered to be individuals, groups, and families but also systems because I've been engaging in macro social work practice and what I found, that some of the same principles that I'm implementing and work with, individuals meeting them where they are asking them to tell me what it is that they need, support and assistance with allowing them to choose what

intervention they want to use. Also, bringing in different therapeutic elements that they've already been using and bringing that and using that in the therapeutic process that goes over much more smoothly than if I go into some home and tell them you have a problem, this is your problem these are the ways that we're going to fix it and I need you to be on board. We would never do that with working with an individual. And what I've also found in my work with systems is that the same collaboration is important as well. I've been corresponding with the team of people -- we were working on a grant proposal and we received information from the funder stating that there was going to be an opportunity to create an addendum to the funding proposal in response to COVID-19, so, some of the people who had submitted RFPs for the proposal wouldn't necessarily have been able to implement their idea in like the restrictions on social distancing. So, we worked collaboratively to identify, like, what do we want to include in the addendum what

are our ideas collectively? How can we synthesize our ideas to create something that's meaningful for our organizations and also for the people that we're providing services to? My approach is for us all to figure out kind of where we are, what we need, what our strengths are and what we can offer and beginning with that. As opposed to beginning with a preconceived agenda, because just like with individual work, you're gonna get a very negative response from someone if you go into their home or go to an individual and say this is what you need to do and I'm telling you what you need to do. Same thing happens with systems if we come in. I'm saying, how can we collaboratively work together? What do you need? What do I need? How can we negotiate things together to provide support to each other? I feel like things are much more successful when you approach them that way.

**19:22 Whitney:** Absolutely there are these sorts of parallel processes at work that really make it useful to embody trauma-informed principles no matter what role you're playing – micro, meso, macro -- and it really does help bring forth strengths and I think you've beautifully highlighted the ways that resiliency can be nurtured by paying attention to these principles and you've certainly touched on empowerment throughout specifically illuminating how creativity can be mobilized to facilitate healing and recovery and profound growth among trauma survivors even in these times where there's this sort of air of powerlessness around some of the circumstances we all find ourselves in. So, I just wonder in what ways have you been able to continue to empower people in the many roles you fulfill?

**20:17 Meagan:** I feel that creativity allows us to survive in spaces where we feel constrained. It allows us to identify ways to keep going even when our options are limited and our choices are not what we would like them to be. So, I feel that focusing on what we are able to do and thinking innovatively on what we are able to do -- and the strengths that we have is really important. So, for me I've just been trying to think of what opportunities do I have, what venues and platforms can I use to connect with people, and how can I mobilize those platforms and use those opportunities to continue to provide support and to continue to build connections. So, for

me one day, I'm like I'm not sure what I'm going to do, as far as our scheduling goes, like my schedule is just completely different now. I have to plan everything around you know, when I'm gonna use the computer. I'm always on a tablet. I'm always on the laptop. How can I still maintain connections with people? A lot of my trainings were cancelled. Me being able to, you know, provide trauma-focused trainings or things that I would have ordinarily done in person. I'm no longer able to do [them] in person, so I think it was the first week of quarantine... I was like 'you know what? I want to schedule webinars' because I have... I had these presentations that I've provided and there's a lot of people that are at home and if you're in quarantine at home you know there's a limited number of people who you're able to see and a limited number of voices you're able to hear. So, wouldn't it be great to have like, an opportunity to connect with other people? By, you know, learning about a particular topic? So, I had created a workshop. One of them is on identifying your strengths and then another one is on identifying your future vision. And I had just created them in January and implemented them for the first time with high school students in Philadelphia and a public high school. I was like, 'what would happen if I just implemented that online?' So, I had people you know, print off if they were able to, the different handouts and then like walked them through this process of identifying their strengths. And then in another workshop, walk them through the process of goal planning and figuring out what they want for themselves in the future. And so, like every week I was kind of thinking of a different idea. I've been doing about two webinars every week to try and continue to build connections. As many other people can relate, you feel like you're in the same space all day – it starts getting a little redundant, frustrating -- you're tired of seeing the same chair, the sand walls. So, I was like 'what would happen if I like made an inked mural and put it as my backdrop?' and 'what would also happen if I like, cleaned out this space and made it into an office area so I can pretend like I'm having meetings in different spaces?' Even though I'm still in the same house... so, just you know, thinking creatively. So, some of the students that I have at College are gonna be graduating and not going to be able to participate in their graduation activities due to the virus and social distancing. So, I said like what are the losses that they're experiencing and how frustrating must that be to finally like achieve this goal and you can't actually celebrate it the way you would want to. So, one morning I woke up and I was like what if I did like a virtual graduation speech for new social workers? So, I had that schedule and I think that we all have like these innovative creative ideas if we just take a second to say like, 'what can I contribute? What's something I can do that's mutually beneficial? Me sharing and other people being able to benefit?' So, those are some examples.

**23:56 Whitney:** Yes, and some really incredible concrete examples. So, thank you for the inspiration. For the rest of us... I think many of us are feeling grateful for people like you, finding new ways to keep us engaged and feeling human right now. Which brings me to wonder what have you found yourself finding gratitude in and appreciating lately? And what sort of difference has that made for you?

**24:27 Meagan:** So, something that I knew before but that I really... I guess the current state of our country of the world right now has really further emphasized this for me... is a need for art the need for artistic expression, for creativity, for color, for experimentation, for expressive play. I knew that I couldn't live without it before the pandemic, and I definitely know that I can't live without it now. And that has really, really, allowed me to like, escape when I can't physically escape. When all of the options for places... where I would physically go to are now closed. Are now inaccessible... Creativity, imagination, being able to experiment... to make something ugly that I don't like and try again later. Or to realize what I learned from that ugly thing that I made. it's really even further solidified for me the fact that like I can't I can't go on without creativity and whether that creativity looks like the visual arts or dance or music or writing I think it's important for all of us to find those sources of creativity, because it can really give us a voice... Help us feel empowered... Provide us with options, with choices, and really give us a reason to continue on even when our circumstances look bleak and life feels very overwhelming.

**25:50 Whitney:** What a fabulous bit of insight to share and I'm personally really heartened to hear how, yes for you and many others, there have been some changes to the ways that individuals and systems managed. And yet many of the strategies that are working best right now are those that have helped us prevail in the past and the building that resilience within ourselves, sort of proactively, has made it so we can access this strength and wisdom to navigate our lives even when they look quite different than they have before. Or, what we might have expected – so, as we bring our time together for a close today I just wonder if for people who are in similar spots interfacing with trauma and trauma survivors in a variety of settings in ways, if you might provide us with some final thoughts on the reasons you think embodying trauma-informed principles in our work is particularly vital right now?

**26:58 Meagan:** One of the things that I would say to others who are navigating this name stress is often times when we're in the midst of stress crisis trauma, we get overwhelmed by all of the negative ways that things are impacting us. But something that I emphasize in my work with individuals, and something that I would emphasize to all of us who are experiencing the current pandemic is that wherever there are stories of trauma, there are always stories of strength. There are always stories of resilience. Sometimes it takes a little time for us to kind of train our eyes to see the strength with the same emphasis that we see and observe the pain and the trauma, but I would... I would really encourage people to yes, make space for the pain, make space for the trauma, make space for the fear, for the instability and for our feelings of helplessness... but also make space for the strength make space for how people are bouncing back. Again, how people are providing support and encouragement and are engaging in acts of creativity, even in the midst of all of the stress and chaos we're experiencing collectively.



**28:02 Whitney:** Wow that's profoundly moving, and so insightful and just a lovely way to close for today. So, on behalf of the Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care, Megan thank you so much for being here today and for sharing your witness of strength and resiliency as well as letting us know how we can harness and unlock creativity to bring forth new possibilities for ourselves even in this strange time we're all navigating. It has been such a pleasure and we're so grateful to have had you on this podcast.

**28:38 Meagan:** Thank you for having me. Take care.

**28:51 Whitney:** You too.