

Interview on COVID-19 Response with Ambika, a Provider

0:00 Whitney: Welcome to Rising from the Ashes Trauma talks, a podcast series brought to you by the UB's School of Social Works' the Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care. Our Trauma Talks Series provides a platform for people who have worked within the field of trauma, as well as those who've 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 Ambika Swami, who works as a direct professional staff member at "Community Services for Every1," and also volunteers with, and helps raise funds for Vibha.org to advance health and education for vulnerable school aged young people in India. On behalf of the Institute, thank you so much for being here today Ambika and for sharing your story with us.

0:53 Ambika: Thank you so much for having me here.

0:56 Whitney: Sure, so glad to have you. I'm wondering if we could begin Ambika, with you just letting us know a little bit about the capacity in which you're interacting with trauma survivors.

1:06 Ambika: Uh, right now, I'm working with the Community Services for Every1, uh, who are mainly working with intellectual disability and physical disability. And, um, most of the, uh, my individuals have gone through some kind of a trauma like single trauma or repeated trauma in their childhood. And that is still affecting them in some ways. And even today's days, when they are in their teenaged years and old age, we can see, then they have gone through, uh, in the childhood. So, I help them with their community application like... more of like making them independent in the community without any family. So. It's, it has been a, a vast experience that I'm getting. So yeah, it's just, it's wonderful working in these kinds of settings, you know?

2:10 Whitney: Absolutely. And I'm looking forward to hearing more about your experience through a trauma informed lens, because right now, navigating both large scale civil unrest related to social injustice and COVID-19, we truly are all in the midst of this collective trauma and have some major shared experiences, and how we as providers respond really matters. So, I'm wondering how it is that even in the face of these dual pandemics, so to speak, you've managed to continue in your role.

2:46 Ambika: Uh, it is, uh, getting challenging in this kind of a pandemic, because this is something we have never hoped for it. Never ready for this kind of thing that where you have to stay in the, in the house. And especially when it comes to my individual, it could be anything. It's just sitting at home and just... Because we have to sit at home only that can even trigger them for any kind of situation. And what happens, especially who are living in residential home group homes... It could be very risky behavior for themselves and for others who are living around them, or who are helping, people like us, taking professional steps. Uh, sometimes it's, it's really hard for me to manage that kind of a trigger, but we are slowly getting it. People now, although they are intellectually disabled, but they do understand the seriousness of the coronavirus or COVID-19, which is going on. It's not only around us. It's a whole world is facing the problem. When we work with them creatively, like working on the arts music therapy, sometimes just sit

with them and just have a coffee with them and just listen to them, not just to react. Or reply on their stuff. Just, just listen to them easy when kind of therapy for them. So, it's just, it's hard. It's hard. We are getting along because we are human beings. I think we are the strongest power in this world to who has, who has that unique ability to help each other and understand each other. And that's, that's what makes it easier to go through this, I guess.

4:43 Whitney: Yes. So true that in these moments of total disruption, healing really can happen through relationships and connection and that maintaining presence for those we work with can be extraordinarily powerful in and of it. And, you know, as you begin to describe your experiences, it sounds like you're really noticing how important it is to be tuned into the central aspects of trauma informed care, which invites all of us to stop asking what is wrong with this person, and move this instead toward considering what has happened to this person. Doctors, Roger Fallot and Maxine Harris have pioneered seminal research about the implementation of trauma informed care. And in doing so have identified the frameworks, five guiding principles as safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. And so today we're going to explore how these principles have shaped and continue to shape your work in the times that we live in now with these two pandemics. And if we could just begin with you making comment to how you establish your own sense of physical and psychological safety, I think that would be a great jumping off point.

5:53 Ambika: I feel my personal safety is like... You just do your yoga in the morning, just relaxing your body. And it's been like more than eight years that I'm doing yoga. I started when I was pregnant, I really needed that yoga meditation in that time, because I don't have my family here... that time me and my husband were here only, only as a family, you know, so I was, I was much needed in that yoga and meditation with my pop had told me to do and start with, so I'm doing yoga from that, that, you know, from that time. This helps you... this really helps you to, uh, collect all that confidence that you have to be strong when it comes to any risky, uh, atmosphere around you. You know, and I think in this kind of pandemic, you have to be really calm because they all have already triggered. Now. Now it's been like more than four years now and I have already studied psychology... Uh, so, uh, I understand that it's not them. It's something that has happened with them in the past and something which is intellectual and the chronicle, um, things that is triggering them, you know? So, the mindfulness, I guess mindfulness and the calm techniques that you, that you have learned, you need to teach them too, so they can manage it even though you are not there.

7:39 Whitney: And I like how you've highlighted how you're able to maintain a calm presence, even when there's so much that you encounter in your role specifically, because you have found techniques that are useful to you. And that's so vital to providers who interface with trauma survivors, especially now. Since we can't, you know, make these systems level circumstances better with the snap of a finger and a lot is beyond our control. And yet what we can do is reflect upon and engage in what helps us feel safe so that we can be sure that we don't retraumatize, or at least don't make things worse by being able to come present every single day. And so thinking about what being able to do that really looks like I'm wondering, what has been useful to you in establishing that same sense of safety for the individuals that you work with?

8:33 Ambika: Uh, right now, the company is strictly following UNY New York State Health Regulations that they are providing even, OPWDD, Office for People with Developmentally Disabled, they are also providing so many resources, reading materials, and other creative things like even providing sanitizer. When it comes to health and hygienic, we are counseling. Like as much as we can. It's not like they cannot understand or they cannot get it or they cannot do it. It's not like that. It's just that encouragement that positive support they needed. That's all, I guess, sometimes.

9:18 Whitney: I appreciate the emphasis on doing with rather than doing for, and also that you've recognized that, you know, despite whatever preconceived notions people may have about the individuals with whom you work, that they do possess expertise of their own needs and are able to keep themselves safe when you collaborate and support their self-efficacy, however, works for each one of them. And I imagine that, in your spot establishing and maintaining trust plays a really important role in people being able to be responsive to their needs and engage with your organization in those ways that support that. So, I'm wondering what you've noticed about how a sense of trust impacts the people you serve and how you've gone about establishing that.

10:09 Ambika: So, uh, just telling them and talking to them and just telling them how, how, how, it's gonna get slow. If we follow all the instructions that that is, uh, provided by New York Health Department and the CDC and OPW DD and Community Services, they are also taking their own measurements to stop this spread. Uh, we have to get still get connected with each other. That's how, uh, built that trust, I guess. And it's been like four years that I'm working with them. So, I have already built a trust. You know, my individuals have faced their own, uh, personal pandemics and I was there. And you, if you just assure them that, no worries we are here. We are here for you. No matter whenever you need it, we are here. We are still get connected with each other on phone and zoom and no matter what, uh, I can just go and see them and with them on their birthdays, on their special days, if you go and just, you know, with them and hug them, they feel awesome. I think that is the process to build the trust and to maintain that trust.

11:28 Whitney: Wow. I think you're spot on when you highlight how it's really been a process of showing up and following through over the course of a lengthy period of time during which you've been paying attention to building these relationships that are rooted in trust, because trust is hard earned, especially among trauma survivors and also really among those who interface with trauma as those in helping roles like yours. And to build on that, similar to how we can observe and notice stress responses, individuals, we may also notice stress responses, transpiring at an organizational level. So, with that frame in mind, I am just wondering. What do you notice your workplace setting and its administrators doing to really maximize honesty and transparency to build trust amongst staff that can buffer that multiple level of stress with which you and your colleagues are all faced right now?

12:25 Ambika: Um, uh, frankly speaking, I have observed a tremendous flexibility and the transparency in my company and myself. To be honest, I have never observed this kind of flexibility before this. I guess this pandemic is a teaching us in every way, at every layer of our society, we are learning so many things from each other. And nowadays that no matter what pandemic we are facing, but there are so many people that wants to help each other from like

higher level people wants to teach at grass help and teach at a grassroots level people and grassroots level people want to give that support then, uh, give back, uh, encouragement, doing their own work. So higher level administration can keep going on, you know, and, uh, even though... Even though, because of having so many jobless people, uh, our company is creating a lot of job opportunities. And they're being so flexible, even myself... A couple of, couple of weeks I wanted to just take a couple of, they allow me to take a personal leave! All these different, different, different sections are helping each other. The whole thing, whole feeling is about helping each other. And that is like, that is what I call a good group work or an awesome collaboration that we are getting from our company and our individuals and our, my DSP colleagues. And even if I am... I'm all often I, if I asked a couple of my colleagues just to go and help them, help my people, they are more than willing to go and help them, you know? So, these kinds of things, we are learning in this pandemic. We are getting in this pandemic. I think this is the "awesomest feeling ever" that we are experiencing and we are having not met work or what's the problem but as a human being really wants to help each other. [giggles and happy sounding]

14:37 Whitney: Yeah, for sure. There are these silver linings from the pandemic, as we're all sort of realizing the ways in which we as humans have a necessity to connect and to collaborate. And I am really struck by your organization's responsiveness to this in terms of providing flexibilities so that the team can work together to meet the very unique and really ever evolving needs of the individuals and community that you serve. And, you know, on the note of these positive effects that we are seeing, as we all navigate a truly unprecedented era, I am wondering what other new possibilities you've noticed emerging when collaboration is present?

15:22 Ambika: I think, um, now I, as I am working with another organization, which is completely online now, and uh, there are people, so many people who wants to help new people, but they cannot go in person to person or personally and help them. So those people want to help in any ways in any form. You know, even though it's a \$2 or \$50 or a hundred dollars to donate it, and the wants to show that they want to help. These possibilities, I wasn't really expecting in this kind of economic crisis, but yes Even, even my company, they are also partnering with other different, different kinds of companies. They are more than willing to come forward and donate all that money just to help who are in need. And it's not only about my company or my people. It's just like, it's like everywhere. It's even time to donate in India. In India, everyone is raising a lot, a lot. It's crazy. And the people who are literally depended on the daily wages, they are dying even before Corona hits them. Uh, so the, these kinds of, uh, I think feelings, the honest feelings... Are really important that, uh, no matter you go personally over there or no, uh, you, you still want to, you still want to help, and you are taking those steps. You are trying to do something. I think, um, these are different, different companies are coming together and trying to take, or get some kind of creative solution where we can follow that six feet social distancing wearing mask and do something for our own community. So, I think that possibility is emerging nowadays.

17:25 Whitney: I love how you're drawing attention to how collaboration can happen at so many levels and how you know, we're all community members, and this is bigger than just our organization. So, let's identify each spot, strengths, and really work together to meet the needs of our community. That's really inspirational. And so, thinking about how this translates to your role and the services that you provide personally, knowing that the Corona Virus has really

impacted our ability to reach out to our support systems, I do wonder how you're really able to include other important people in your clients' lives in times of physical distancing?

18:08 Ambika: Right now, we are focusing on them and their family. So, uh, before this pandemic, I used to work with, uh, three, three people in a day. Uh, but now I can have them all in clinic because of zoom and technology and, you know, group chatting and all those, I can literally talk to them in a group. And it is, it is literally a different experience for my individuals. They love this exercise. Sometimes I can just talk to one individually with their family and it's, it's a load of love. Trust me, they just crack loads of jokes around each other and they just pull legs around each other. And it's completely different because we don't have that time in the day. Uh, uh, every individual has their own goals and every, like I got 13 people, and everyone has a socialization that we have to go up with this. I think this because of this pandemic, we are getting connected with as a human-human, not just as a go out and I will daily see nature and work and know them... But this one is giving us a whole new perspective. People, my English Wells are looking differently at this stage. So, they got the different attitudes, different prospective, or different things to do. We are literally playing UNO online Zooming. So, it's really fun. I think these kinds of creative ways. Keeping them busy. Uh, if you give them some kind of homework, like do some artwork and let's show it tomorrow, like kind of an art exhibition, they love it. They're loving it. And, uh, connecting with musical, uh, on Facebook, there are some free musical virtual sessions that going on sometimes. We also watch them together on zoom. So, technology is making us easy, this pandemic.

20:25 Whitney: That's incredible. I am honestly so impressed by how you've leveraged technology to really provide support and connect people, and also to keep people on track to achieve their goals. Wow. All of which, you know, is so vital anytime, and maybe especially right now. And as you talk about these sorts of new ways that you found to collaborate, it is bringing me back to that flexibility piece that we talked about earlier, because it really sounds like your organization is giving you a lot of opportunities to make your own choices. And I'm just wondering if you could make comment to that a bit.

21:05 Ambika: Uh, and frankly speaking, I think my manager, she was like, do whatever you want to it's all your time. You're gonna work from home. It depends on you. Do you own time table, make your own schedule and just let me know? I think that kind of openness that you can come with me, come to me with any kind of, uh, any kind of, uh, Schedule any kind of project, any kind of, uh, problems, any kind of solutions. Just let me know and we'll figure it out and come back. So, I guess that kind of a, um, attitude gives you more power to do your best or try to give something different, basically. So, we are thinking in that way, that helps a lot.

21:55 Whitney: Wow. Yeah, no doubt that experiencing that sort of empowerment can really open up new doors for you as well as really the others you come into contact with. And so, thinking in that vein, I'm really curious as to what sort of new and different strengths that you've noticed emerging from those you serve when you've prioritized empowerment in your role.

22:19 Ambika: I am feeling empowered because our company is giving us that much of uh, that much off rights, that much of fewer choices, that much of your flexibility working as per your own peace. You know, I think that gives us a lot of, lot of power so we can transfer those to our

individuals. So, we give them a lot of choices. We give them a lot of flexibility, time and limitless, uh, limitless things that we can do at home, too. So that gives you another level of positivity and the power that let's do the next or something else, you know?

23:03 Whitney: Yes. And I really like how you're weaving together these principles so beautifully because they're all interconnected. And I also really appreciate your positivity and attention to possibility because really there is no doubt that COVID 19 has been a profound disruption that is experienced as traumatic for many, and maybe even most of us, let alone the civil unrest we're all facing. And yet we know that we can make meaning of and emerge from these challenging experiences, more resilient and perhaps stronger than ever before. And so, I'm wondering in what way. Ways you personally feel that you've become more resilient or experienced a sense of growth as this whole situation has unfolded?

23:50 Ambika: Uh, I think, uh, um, the resiliency cannot be defined as a protect to, or a positive process that reduces, um, comes under conditions of risk. Uh, this is this one. This definition, given by Greenberg. And, um, he, um, so he, he, I think he, he understood the whole, uh, process of resiliency. I would say it's more of like journey. Where we, uh, where we slowly, slowly improve our resiliency by our experiences. And even though, it's a pandemic. People are not ready to give up. I guess that thing is really important for the resiliency. It's not something like, it comes from some magic or something. No, it's in, it's in you, It's somewhere in deep in you. It's just because of that, Uh, because of the traumatic experiences that gets by others, others, other expenses. But once you accept that, like this is the situation and this is the virus. No matter what we have to, we cannot give up on anything. We cannot stop leaving over life.

25:16 Whitney: Sure. Acceptance, persistence, and remaining focused on what you can do versus how, you know, the circumstances are limiting you. Really insightful points there. And, you know, based on this conversation and your sense of optimism and hope, that really seems to underlie so much of what you do, I'm curious to know what you've been finding yourself, appreciating or finding gratitude in lately.

25:43 Ambika: You know, there are so many individuals that I know working with who are coming, who are coming from very poor background, uh, economically, financially, uh, emotionally. And I feel that we are still, uh, we are still pretty lucky and fortunate having such a wonderful house, such a wonderful kids in good condition, you know? We are still so far that we can enjoy this kind of a weather, that this kind of beautiful nature. I got a big back there, so I do a lot of gardening. So, I feel like we are still so fortunate, even though this kind of a pandemic – nature did not give up on us. And we also not supposed to give up on anything. You know, that's, that's a big thing that we are so fortunate to learn those kinds of things from our nature. And, um, I guess, you know, I am, I can't be like enough thankful to the God that giving us wonderful life. Um, even though this pandemic, created by human or nature or whatever it is, we are still surviving. I think we are still breathing. I think this is the, the biggest, uh, fortune thing that is happening with us. So, I feel really grateful to every single aspect of society.

27:17 Whitney: Hmm, beautiful. And so rich and really vital to be thinking about because yes, there is loss and stress and inequity and other extreme challenges. And yet we not only have proven that we can keep going, but also that we can do so creatively and resourcefully and with

attention to strengths rather than deficits and really harmoniously with one another in so many different ways. And you know, also that we can really reach for empathy and make commitments to be more thoughtful around how we interact with others in ways that really bring us closer to a trauma informed world. So, on that note, as we bring our time together to a close for today, I am wondering for others who are in similar spots, working in the field and interfacing with trauma and trauma survivors, certainly in addition to enduring what we all are experiencing at this time, can you just offer a, maybe a few final words on what stands out to you as the most profound reasons why providing trauma informed care is particularly crucial right now?

28:28 Ambika: Trauma informed care gives us an opportunity to understand the need, so we can help, uh, through these kinds of principles because this principle gives us a basic fundamental, uh, set of way to start and to, you know, help each other. And I guess trauma informed care is widely using and practicing nowadays. Uh, and of course it's showing a tremendous result out of it, you know, so I feel that it is much needed and it is going to be much new data approach, uh, in, in the community when it comes to working with traumatized people, intellectual people, mentally, uh, in people, in every settings of, uh, every, every setting.

29:20 Whitney: Yeah, for sure. And with those wise closing words, on behalf of the Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today on Ambika, and for sharing your witness of strength and resiliency, as well as how these principles have unfolded in and impacted your experience. Truly been a pleasure and such an honor.

29:43 Ambika: It's been, it's been a pleasure to me actually.