Wellness Strategies for Harm Reduction Providers During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people who use drugs (PWUD) have led to devastating outcomes, including an estimated 93,000 overdose deaths in the U.S. in 2020.1 Throughout the pandemic, harm reduction providers have worked tirelessly to care for their communities despite facing significant challenges, including operational disruptions, increased health risks among staff and program participants and rapidly transitioning office-based services to virtual, mobile and mail-based models, among many others. During the pandemic, harm reduction providers have faced significantly increased stress and trauma, exacerbating risks to their own health and wellness.

The National Council for Mental Wellbeing, with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), hosted a webinar on April 27, 2021, to discuss innovative and actionable strategies that harm reduction organizations and other providers who care for PWUD can implement to promote staff wellness and prevent stress and burnout. Informed by the real-world experiences of three experts from the field, the strategies discussed in the webinar can be adapted and replicated. The following list includes helpful resources and tools to further support the implementation of wellness strategies for harm reduction and other providers who care for PWUD.

Resources

Research & Literature

- Positive psychology in a pandemic: buffering, bolstering, and building mental health by Lea Waters et al. (The Journal of Positive Psychology) – Research article that discusses how the enhancement of positive psychology, such as coping, self-compassion, gratitude, character

strengths, positive emotions, positive interpersonal processes and high-quality connection, has a positive impact on mental health.

- **Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others** by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burt – Book that offers tools and resources related to navigating the impact of trauma on daily lives and practices that can be applied in personal and professional settings.

- **Restoring Sanctuary: A New Operating System for Trauma-informed Systems of Care** by Sandra L. Bloom and Brian Farragher – Book that discusses the Sanctuary Model, which focuses on creating an organizational culture that fosters an environment for healing from trauma.

- **True Refuge: Finding Peace and Freedom in Your Own Awakened Heart** by Tara Brach, PhD – Book that provides guidance on finding inner sanctuary of peace and wisdom in times of adversity.

- **The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook: A Proven Way to Accept Yourself, Build Inner Strength, and Thrive** by Kristin Neff, PhD and Christopher Germer, PhD – Evidence-based workbook that provides guidance on self-compassion activities, such as guided meditations, daily practices, physical exercises and storytelling.

### Organizational Activities & Resources

- **Doors to Wellbeing: National Consumer Technical Assistance Center** (The Copeland Center for Wellness and Recovery) – Technical assistance center that offers a catalog of resources and tools, including webinars, newsletters and guides, to support peer support workers and other care providers related to incorporating wellness strategies and implementing best practices for self-care.

- **How To Include Night Shift Workers in Your Wellness Program** (The Wellness Connection) – Article that identifies six action steps for organizations to take when integrating wellness programming into night shift schedules.

- **Creating a Safe Space: Healthcare Worker Support Toolkit** (Canadian Patient Safety Institute) – Toolkit that provides guidance on developing or enhancing health care worker support programs by offering tools, resources and templates from organizations that have successfully implemented similar programs.

- **How to Plan a Candlelight Vigil: Step-by-step** (Cake) – Article that describes five steps for organizing a candlelight vigil to commemorate the loss of loved ones.

- **Six Ways to Incorporate Wellness into Your Next Virtual Event** (MeetingPlay) – Article that lists six action steps to incorporate virtual wellness events into remote work environments, such as leading by example, providing breaks, and calming the mind, among others.
• **Harm Reduction Support Groups: An Introduction for Facilitators** (Baltimore Harm Reduction Coalition) – Guide that provides tips and suggestions for establishing and facilitating harm reduction support groups.

• **Vicarious Trauma Organizational Readiness Guide** (Northeastern University’s Institute on Urban Health Research and Practice) – Organizational assessment that informs opportunities to address vicarious trauma among staff through identifying organizational strengths regarding vicarious trauma-informed policies, procedures, practices and programs.

• **Peer Support Toolkit** (Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual disAbility Services) – Toolkit that provides information about preparing staff, policies and procedures for the integration of peer support workers. In particular, module four discusses strategies for supporting, supervising and retaining peer staff and includes activities, such as a self-care assessment, compassion fatigue assessment and workplace wellness recovery action plans.

### Harm Reduction Staff Wellness Resources

• **Peer Respite Directory** (Peer Respite Action & Evaluation) – Directory of peer respites organized by state that provides direct links to state programs. The resource currently represents programs in 14 states and was last updated in 2018.

• **Faces & Voices of Recovery** – Recovery community network dedicated to connecting and mobilizing people with substance use challenges, families and allies through advocacy and education.

• **Peer Recovery Specialist Support Group** – Virtual peer support group for peer support workers that offers a space to discuss professional development, share experiences and identify strategies to overcome challenges. Based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but open to peer support workers nationwide, this group meets virtually every other Wednesday from 7-8 p.m. ET.

• **Grief Recovery After a Substance Passing** (Grief Recovery After Substance Passing [GRASP]) – National support group for those who have lost loved ones to substance use with local chapters in 37 states and resources to start a GRASP chapter.

• **Panel: Making Space for Grief and Loss** (National Harm Reduction Coalition) – Recorded panel of harm reduction care providers that discusses how to create space for grief, support care workers and cope with the realities and frustrations of loss.

• **Coping With Overdose Fatalities** (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Public Health) – Tool that can be used by harm reduction and other health services providers to help cope with the effects of fatalities from substance use.
Personal Wellness Resources

- **Self-Care Wheel** (Olga Phoenix Project) – Tool that can be used by harm reduction and other care providers to create a self-care plan across several wellness domains and can be shared with their supervisors to identify and personalize self-care and wellness activities.
- **Fighting Compassion Fatigue During Public Health Epidemics** (Association of State and Territorial Health Officials) – Brief that recognizes and defines the impact of compassion fatigue and identifies action steps to help people working during health epidemics maintain self-care and compassion.
- **Cake** (Cake) – Online platform for people seeking guidance and resources on preparing for and coping with death, grief and mortality.
  - How to Survive the Grief of an Overdose Death: 11 Tips
  - 12 Things You Can Do After Losing a Friend to an Overdose
- **Self-care for Providers** (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA]) – List of resources for providers who work with people experiencing homelessness and may experience stress, compassion fatigue or burnout.
- **Therapy for Latinx** (Therapy for Latinx) – Directory of Latinx-identifying therapists and additional mental health-related information and resources.
- **Asian Mental Health Collective** (Asian Mental Health Collective) – Mental health collective that provides a wide range of resources for the Asian American community, such as a directory of Asian, Pacific Islander and South Asian American therapists and information on destigmatizing mental health within the community.
- **National Queer & Trans Therapists of Color Network** (National Queer & Trans Therapists of Color Network) – Mental health network that provides a wide range of resources for queer and trans people of color (QTPoC), such as a directory of therapists and technical assistance for organizations working with QTPoC.

Recorded Webinars

- **Communication: Healthy Boundaries for Peer Specialists** (Doors to Wellbeing) – Recorded webinar that discusses strategies and tools to maintain healthy boundaries between peer support workers and participants through building communication skills. Webinar requires free registration to access.
- **National Practice Guidelines for Peer Specialists and Supervisors** (Doors to Wellbeing) – Recorded webinar that discusses the core peer support values in relation to supervisor relationships and
provides practical tips on how supervisors can support peer support workers. Webinar requires free registration to access.

- **WRAP: An Approach to Person-Led Crisis and Post Crisis Planning** (Doors to Wellbeing) – Recorded webinar that discusses the Wellness Recovery Action Planning crisis and post-crisis planning concepts by introducing tools and implementation examples and addressing opportunities and challenges in daily practice. Webinar requires free registration to access.

- **Enhancing Personal Capacity for Wellness: Wellness in Peer Support—An Overview** (SAMHSA) – Recorded webinar that provides an overview on wellness strategies within peer support programs and the importance of lived experiences and relationship-based roles of peers.

### Technology-assisted Resources

- **Headspace** – Mindfulness mobile application with a paid subscription-based service for improving wellbeing by providing activities, such as meditation, sleep sounds, music, tension-releasing workouts and yoga, and allowing users to set up daily reminders to practice mindfulness. There is a paid subscription option for workplaces to give their employees access to Headspace services.

- **Exhale** – Mindfulness mobile application that is the first to provide emotional wellbeing activities designed for Black, Indigenous and other women of color (BIWOC) and considers systems of oppression that BIWOC face in their daily lives. It offers a hybrid of free and paid activities.

- **Liberate** – Wellness mobile application with a paid subscription-based service for meditation designed for and taught by Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC).

- **The Safe Place** (Black Girl Nerds) – Wellness mobile application that provides free information and services focused on the Black community, including self-care tips on coping with police brutality, Black mental health statistics and meditation guidance.

### Examples from the Field

- **Well Badger Resource Center** (Well Badger Resource Center) – Wisconsin state resource that offers residents free assistance to access mental health resources by connecting them to a certified Information and Referral Specialist, who assesses the person’s situation and suggests programs that will best fit their needs. The center includes an online directory of over 4,000 services, programs and resources in Wisconsin.

- **Wisconsin Peer Specialist Employment Initiative** (Wisconsin Peer Specialist Employment Initiative) – Initiative that supports the professional development of peer support workers pursuing certification as a Certified Peer Specialist or Certified Parent Peer Specialist, and provides additional peer support resources for Black, Indigenous, and communities of color in Wisconsin.
• **Resilient Wisconsin** (Wisconsin Department of Health Services) – Wisconsin state resource that includes wellness activities and support, such as coloring pages and hotline contact information, to help Wisconsin residents cope with grief, stress and anxiety exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

• **Peer Services: Peer-Run Respites** (Wisconsin Department of Health Services) – Directory of Wisconsin’s five peer-run respite centers that provide peer support services to people experiencing mental health and substance use challenges. The respite centers offer a supportive, home-like environment and wellness activities, such as art, exercise and a safe space for healing, and people generally stay one to five days.

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