**Kari Ann Smith - Mental Wellness During a Crisis**

**April 9, 2020 - Facebook Live Event**

**Transcript**

Hello everybody. I’m a couple minutes early but I figured I’d get started and let everybody get on and all that.

**Chatting to Live watchers**

\* \* Video Time – 1 minute, 32 seconds\* \*

 Well, it’s 7 o’clock so I think we’ll get started. My name is Kari Ann and I am a licensed clinical social worker. I am so blessed to be able to volunteer with the Women’s Empowerment Series. A real quick shout out to the birthday girl Theresa… happy birthday, we love you! Hi Julianna, nice to see you. Hi everybody.

 So for those of you who joined us tonight, I’m really happy you’re here. If you’ve been following our 9-week series, you’ve already got to see Arletta and Erin the last couple of weeks. We’ve been so blessed by their messages so I’m really happy to be here tonight. Welcome back and thanks for those of you who are showing up for the first time, I’m glad you’re here too. If you guys have any questions while I’m on, you can put them in your comments and we will try our best to answer them as we go. If we can’t, then that’s fine, you can just email your questions to info@womensempowermentseries.org. This is week three out of nine weeks. You guys have several more weeks left, six more weeks left, to be able to watch so hopefully tonight is helpful. I’m going to be talking about mental wellness during the crisis. There’s going to be a little bit of tough conversation tonight also, so please, if you need assistance or you need to be around a safe person, please do that. If you need to stop watching for a while please do that. You need to feel whatever you’re feeling and you do you - whatever makes you comfortable.

So I wanted to talk today about some things that can help you manage and maintain your mental wellness. Reminding you of some simple but effective ways for you to be able to get through the harder times. Or if you’re caring for somebody that’s struggling with their illness, some things that you can do to help them. First and foremost, I want to remind everybody that whatever it is that you’re feeling, whatever feelings are coming up right now, whether it’s sadness or anger or frustration, even if you’re happy right now. That’s perfectly normal. Whatever your feelings are are your feelings and you are allowed to feel them so please do that. And don’t let anybody talk you out of them. It’s really important that you feel what you need to feel.

As I was working on this and trying to figure out what message I wanted to send, hopefully I’m able to give you guys some tips on what to do. And hopefully give you the message that we’re all in this together. And that all you are responsible for is coming out of this having survived. Don’t feel like you have to learn a foreign language. I saw that the other day, like, “Make sure you’re learning a foreign language or clean out your house or do whatever.” Don’t feel like, if that’s not where you’re at, or what you can do, or what you can handle right now, you don’t have to do that. Just come out of this survived. Come out of this alive. That’s what we want for you. So I want to remind anybody that if you or anybody you know is feeling suicidal, please reach out for help. You can call 911, they’re still responding to suicidal calls, or you can call the crisis line. We’ll make sure to post all of those right after my talk today. Each county has one, or you can call the national suicide hotlin, too, and they can help as well.

These last few months have been especially difficult. We’re struggling to keep up with our everyday lives and what our new restrictions are. We’re worried about us being sick, about our loved ones getting sick. I personally know of a few people who have had loved ones that are lost and they can’t get to them because they’re so far away. So it’s difficult enough for us to manage our mental wellness when things are normal, right? Whatever our normal is. Let alone when we are in this kind of space. So hopefully tonight you can hear the message that give yourself time to grieve whatever your schedules were, or the places that you used to go, or the people that you used to be able to hang out with anytime you wanted to, that you can’t now. It’s okay to grieve those things and try to process through them. It can be really frustrating when you feel alone and so anyway, give yourself time to do all that.

So while you are in this space, if you are struggling there’s a couple things that you can do, 12 things are on my list, that you can do to help optimize your mental health and your mental wellness.

If you guys were seeing a therapist, please **continue to see that therapist**. I know that there are many outpatient therapy offices right now that are still seeing clients either face-to-face or via TeleHealth and while I know the TeleHealth option isn’t like when you can sit across from your therapist and talk with them, it’s better than nothing. Especially if you’re struggling. Please, please, I can’t reiterate that enough. I know that it’s kind of a pain but reach out to them and make sure that you are continuing to touch base with them. They know you best. And so during this time, don’t feel like you're imposing on them. You know? They want to talk with you. I’ve talked to a lot of therapy friends and their frustration with this is high as well, but please continue to see your therapist or your psychiatrist or your primary care physician. Whoever it is that you reach out to to work on your mental health.

That brings me to point number two. Please **make sure that you’re taking your medications**, and that you’re taking them as prescribed. You should not have a difficult time getting to your medications right now as all of the services that allow for them, or allow for them to be paid are still functioning. They’re an essential function. There may be some delivery issues and so if that’s the case, reach out to your social worker or your therapist or psychiatrist so that they can help kind of guide you through whatever that process would be to get your meds. But pharmacies are considered essential and so you should be able to get your medications. There are resources for you if you need them to be able to help pay for that right now if you’re laid off or what have you. So just keep that in mind too.

The next thing that you can do to optimize your mental wellness is to make sure that you’re staying hydrated. It is really, really easy during the day to not take the time to **drink water** or maybe you start drinking a little earlier in the evening than you normally would. Please stay hydrated. It will help your medications process if you’re on medications. It will help your body to feel rested and rejuvenated. The feelings of dehydration can only exacerbate, or make worse, depression symptoms or anxiety symptoms, so it’s really important that you continue to stay hydrated with water throughout the day. I am the pot calling the kettle black when it comes to that. I am terrible at drinking water. But please try to remember to do that.

As much as you possibly can, and I’m moving on to my next point, **get outside and get some sun**. The vitamin D that comes from the UV rays from the sun will help you. And I know that when I am stuck in the house, even if it’s sunny outside, when I’m stuck in the house for a long period of time, I can feel it. And I can feel my energy draining, and I just want to nap all the time. But get outside, get some fresh air, even if it’s just for a walk around the block, even if you don’t feel like it. Get your accountability partner, get your dog, whatever it’s going to take for you to get outside and get some fresh air so that you can kind of get out of the four walls of your house. Get away from technology. I know that I am terrible at sitting in front of my computer for seven or eight hours a day and forgetting that I need to get up and take a break, get up and get hydrated, get up and walk around. Schedule those breaks for yourself so that you can get outside.

Another thing that really helps is **getting ready every day**. Don’t just wake up and roll out of bed and leave your hair messy. If you are really struggling with depression or anxiety, staying on a schedule will help to keep you grounded. So if you normally would wake up at eight o’clock in the morning or seven o’clock in the morning or five o’clock in the morning and get dressed and take a shower and put on makeup and do your hair, then do that. Continue to do that. I know it seems silly, especially if you’re walking around the house, but it really can make a big difference to make you feel good about yourself and things like that. So please, get up and get ready every day. Again, I’m kind of the worst at that, right? So my typical thing is to get up at seven AM and take a shower and have my coffee and put on my makeup and do my hair and my jewelry and all that, and so I’ve got to remind myself to do that as well. If you work in a place where you are working from home now and they allow you to do Zoom meetings and stuff, I know there’s a lot of people that are on those meetings and they’ve got their messy bun… there’s nothing wrong with a messy bun, but the messy bun going and no makeup and no whatever, and you wouldn’t have normally shown up for work that way. And so when you stop taking care of yourself, you can exacerbate those depressive symptoms that you have and so I would really encourage you, if you’ve been struggling, to start with just a couple of days a week if that’s what it’s going to take to get you going. Again, get your accountability partner, have them call you at the time you’re supposed to be up so that you can take your shower and get ready for the day even if you are staying home with all your kiddos. It’s okay. They want to see you looking good too, and being happy, and so do your best.

Along with that, I have done this a couple of times - **having some virtual parties or gatherings with your friends**, especially if you can’t be with them because of the quarantine and all that. Or they don’t live close enough to you for you to kind of holler ten feet away or however many feet now they’re saying, six feet I think. So make sure that you are having virtual parties or gatherings, doing whatever you can do. Zoom, you can set up free accounts, so you don’t even have to spend the money on that. But you can at least connect with friends that you haven’t been able to connect with.

**Stay on your sleep schedule**. This is a big one. It is really, really easy when you do not have anything to do for the day that you stay up later. One of my other tips is to limit screen time, that’s coming here in a second, and so you know, you’re watching movies or you’re binge-watching something on Netflix, and so it’s really easy for us to get into that habit of staying up later which means we sleep in later which means our schedule is completely off. This will end. When it’s going to end, nobody knows, but it will end. And it will be difficult for all of us to get back on our regular schedule. And so it’s kind of like kids during summer break, right? They have all this time off, and then all of a sudden a week before school starts you’re trying to get them back on their sleep schedule. And it’s hard and so when you’re doing that, you’re programming your body a little differently. And so try as best as you can to stay on your normal sleep schedule. Take your sleep meds if you’re on medication, take them as prescribed, if you normally go to bed at ten and you take your sleep meds at 9:15 or 9:30, continue to do that during this time. It will only help keep your body in check and whatever it is that you are doing to maintain your mental wellness when something like this isn’t going on, you should do when it is going on and one of those things is maintaining your sleep schedule.

I can’t reiterate this enough to you - the next tip that I have for you is to really **limit how much news you listen to** or watch about the virus and about what’s going on. I am not saying put your head in the sand and be uninformed, but what I am saying is please just be careful. Please limit yourself. It can make you anxious. It will make you anxious. It will make you more depressed to hear all of the gory details day after day after day. If you have notifications on your phone where a certain TV channel or certain newspaper sends you notifications every day about, you know, how many more people have the virus or how many more people have passed away, or what have you, maybe turn those notifications off and be very purposeful. “Eight o’clock every morning I’m going to check the news, I’m going to check one channel, and that’s all I’m doing.” Instead of checking every channel multiple times a day, plus getting you know, whatever in your Facebook feed, plus getting every news on your phone and things like that. It isn’t helpful and in fact, it’s really harmful. And so just be very careful with yourself if you know that you can’t handle a lot of the news or you’re feeling particularly anxious or you’re getting more depressed, maybe that’s it. And so just consider limiting the amount of time that you listen to that, or how many channels you check, or things like that. It’s really important.

Again, **limit screen time** if you can. I know that’s hard because we all have our faces in our phones all the time, but during this time especially just keep in mind if you are at work, you may be on the computer a lot but you would be able to get up and walk around maybe, go to someone else’s office, so be careful if you are having Zoom meeting after Zoom meeting after Zoom meeting. Don’t just sit around with your phone in your face on Tik-Tok forever. I don’t know about y’all but I discovered Tik-Tok recently. It’s bad. I might be slightly addicted now. But anyway, just be careful about how much screen time that you’re on. Again, for your anxiety and for your depression or that kind of thing.

Maybe, **start a gratitude journal**. Research has shown that if you start a gratitude journal and every morning you wake up and you say that you’re grateful or you are able to list three things that you’re grateful for, research has shown that it can actually rewire your brain to thinking more positively. And so, you know what they say about what you think is what you become I think is very true.

So let’s see. Oh, this one I am totally stealing from Arletta. I am totally stealing this from her. Because I love it! **Write love letters to yourself** and put them aside for days that you’re really struggling and that you need some help to remind yourself of how grateful you are, how wonderful you are I should have said. You guys are all amazing and you’re doing hard things right now and it can be very depressing and so just make sure that you’re praising yourself for everything that you’re doing. Did you get up today and take a shower? Great! Write yourself a love letter and say today you got up and you killed that shower, you rocked it. As silly as that sounds, sometimes those pep talks are what we need to get through the tough times. And so put those aside, pull them out whenever you need to, read them over and over and over again to yourself. But love on yourself whenever you can.

Lastly for this little section - **don’t cancel plans**. Keep them virtually if possible, and do whatever you can to stay connected to your friends. I know when depressive symptoms or anxiety symptoms get bad, it’s easy to say, “Oh, well it’s kind of a pain right now to get with them anyway so I’m just going to cancel.” Try to avoid cancelling. If you can have… I just had on Tuesday, a birthday party for my brother via Zoom. My sister and my other brother and I got on and had a Zoom meeting for him so that we could celebrate his birthday even though we were supposed to physically be out there. So I think that keeping things like that are important. Staying on your schedule that you would have normally kept had all of this not happened. I think it’s really important.

So my next point is probably going to hit a little bit of a nerve for some people, but I think it’s important to say. **Staying busy and remaining busy and keeping every moment of your day from the time you wake up until the time you go to bed busy and full is a trauma response**. It is a response to not being able to feel what it is that we’re feeling, not allowing yourself to be still. I think that many people who start their days with meditation or prayer or just being still are happier throughout the day. They feel more grounded. So while you are dealing with this crisis and your anxiety is high, take a moment to **just be still**. Do what you can to be still. When you’re having anxious symptoms, **drink some cool water**. That will often help ground you, your body will respond to that, your brain will respond to the cool water and the sensation of that in your mouth so try that. **Say your ABCs** - as silly as that is, it’s something that we can always remember. So during times of crisis, our brain is in our trauma response and we want to pull it out of the trauma response and be able to function because while it’s acting that way and while the chemicals are going crazy in our brain, we can’t function well. We don’t make good decisions because we physically can’t, we psychologically can’t, our brain won’t let us do that. So say your ABCs - it’ll help pull your left and your right brain back together which is what we need, we need you to ground and be able to take a few deep breaths and focus.

One exercise that I really like whenever you’re really struggling and having a hard time during a crisis situation is the **five senses exercise**. You know, where you name five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. I think it’s really, again, it pulls both sides of the brain together and really helps to ground you and keep you kind of out of your head. That I use a lot with my anxiety patients if they’re in a crisis or in an anxiety attack while we’re together I’ll talk them through that exercise. Kids respond really well to this one too so if you’ve got some young ones at home that are really struggling with anxiety right now, this is a good exercise for them to be able to use too because it’s super easy, they’re not big words, they’re not whatever, you can just walk them through. Littler ones can do it too, five or six year olds, that kind of thing.

**Play with Play-doh or a Rubik’s cube** or something in your hand that you can kind of, again, engage both sides of your brain because you’re using your hands, you’re using a manipulative to help you work through whatever anxious feelings that you’re having.

**Do some deep breathing exercises**. Make sure that you’re breathing in slowly and out slowly so you don’t hyperventilate - we don’t want that. We don’t want you to pass out for sure. I’ve seen somebody pass out during breathing exercises before and we don’t want you to do that but take some deep breaths. Be in the moment, be still, and try to work through the feelings that you’re having. I know it’s difficult. I struggle with that too and the best way I find to do breathing exercises is with an accountability buddy, whoever that is. Maybe it’s my daughter. Maybe it’s a friend of mine, a girlfriend. Those things you can do virtually too. If you call a friend and say, “Hey, I just need to do some breathing right now. I’m in a bad space and I just need some help,” and they know that breathing helps you, then you can have them talk through square breathing which is breathing in and breathing out for four seconds each time and being very purposeful on the breaths that you’re doing.

**Take a shower**! This is a big one. Talk about hitting your senses all at once. This is a good one to be able to ground you if you need to. Some people say take a cool shower, some people say take a warm shower. Cool showers definitely jolt you a little bit more so I don’t know, for me, that is not helpful at all. I like to be able to take a warm shower, so do what you feel is right and comfortable for you. But yeah, do that, because taking a shower is really helpful.

And lastly, the last grounding technique is to **find an object and focus on it and describe it in detail**. So you guys can’t see it but I have some flowers sitting in front of me and what I would do is I would describe the flower, right, in great detail, way more than I normally would because being able to focus on that and focus on the details of that flower really help to kind of ground you and again, engage both sides of the brain, be able to pull you out of that crisis mode. Your body is meant to only focus on the main things that keep you alive and will get you out of danger when you’re in a crisis mode. You don’t want to stay there for long, especially if you have a trauma background, you don’t want to get back in there and stay there for a very long time.

I can see a question and it’s, I want to answer it. An accountability buddy is... yes! Sarah did a good job describing it. It’s somebody that you want to reach out to to say, “Hey, whenever I’m struggling I really would like it if I could give you a call and have you walk me through whatever, breathing exercises or what have you.” They’re somebody that will call you if you kind of go MIA for a little while. They have no problems calling you out on your stuff if you need to be reminded to take your meds or reminded to go to therapy or reminded to, “Hey, you haven’t gotten up and taken a shower in two days. I need you to get up, I need you to take a shower, and I need you to Zoom me when you’re done.” So it’s somebody that’s close enough to you that you feel comfortable with, being able to work through some of your anxious or depressive symptoms.

Lastly, I want to talk about **if you’re a person caring for somebody who is having mental health issues right now**, maybe they had them prior to this and they’re struggling. Or maybe you didn’t know that they had them prior to this or they weren’t really struggling, they were able to maintain. And now they’re really having a hard time. I have a couple of tips for you on what to do with those folks.

First, **don’t try to fix it**. It’s easy for us to say, “Well you should do this. Or you should do this,” or whatever, but really, when you have somebody close to you that's struggling, especially if you’re their accountability buddy, there’s a time and a place to help them remember the things that they should be doing to help ground themselves and things like that, but then there’s also a time to just listen, which is my next point. Say things like, “I’m glad that you’re trusting me with this,” or, “I’m here for you,” or asking them directly, “How can I help? What can I do for you? What do you need from me right now?” It’s okay to ask them, “How bad is this? Are you struggling enough that you want to hurt yourself?” Remember, it isn’t going to make them want to hurt themselves if you ask them. They’ve already thought of that if their response is yes, you did not put them in that state. Please, please ask the question. Just in case they need you to be the one to help intervene.

**Take care of yourself first**. I was watching, again, the Southwest Airlines guy who is hysterical, doing the airline preflight thing about the oxygen mask. It is so very true, if you can’t be the one to help yourself then you won’t be able to help anybody else. So ultimately it’s, again, you can’t pour from an empty cup and so please make sure that you’re filling your own cup and taking care of yourself during this time too. And it’s okay to back off and to say, “Hey, I can’t do this right now. My plate is full and I can’t do this right now.”

**Acknowledge what they say they’re feeling**, even if you aren’t feeling it. So if they’re saying, “I feel alone. I feel depressed. I feel angry,” and you aren’t feeling that, it’s okay to say, “I hear what you’re saying. I hear that you’re angry, and that’s okay to feel like that.” Their feelings are their own whether you think they’re right, wrong, or indifferent, or whether they’re real or not real to you. And so allow them to feel those feelings.

**Use a calm voice when you talk with them**. This is my last tip for you. Use a calm voice with them. Try not to yell, try not to get frustrated, try not to get angry at them. Especially those who do find… Amy I can see your comment… especially those who seem to find excuses for not being able to work on their mental health. You can be there for them, but you can only be there for them so far. They have to, you can’t force them. You do your best to be there for them in whatever capacity you’re able to be there for them, but ultimately it is up to them, right? If they do anything or if they move to make themselves better and working better on whatever. So if you need to be the one that calls 911 for them then maybe that’s who you need to be. But again, it’s really up to them which is unfortunate. You can be there and be an accountability buddy and hopefully they have asked you to do that and you’re able to work with them, but you can only be there so much.

Okay, so. We’ve gone through a lot of stuff tonight and I love talking about things that you guys can do to help others and help yourselves. It’s not always as upbeat and inspiring as the topics that Arletta and Erin had, but I think it’s really important because we are all here to help one another through this. We’re all struggling in our own way, whatever that looks like. And so I want to thank you guys for being here tonight and for listening. It’s hard and it’s especially hard when you’re struggling and you’re seeing somebody else in your life struggle too, so be there for yourself. Be there and be present for your family if that’s what you can be. But remember to take care of you and feel whatever it is that you need to feel.

Next week we will have one of these again. Maria is going to be here next week talking about maintaining the calm in the house. It’s at seven PM on Thursday. I just want to give you guys one last reminder that if you are struggling, or if you know of anybody that is struggling with wanting to hurt themselves, with being suicidal, please reach out and call 911. You can use the suicide hotlines again as I talked about. They’ll be posted here in just a minute in the Women’s Empowerment Series Facebook page and so if you need to utilize that, then please do that. I so appreciate you guys being here and listening to me for 30 minutes. You guys are doing an amazing job and if nobody has told you today, you’re beautiful and you belong here and we would miss you if you were gone. So please stay. And I hope that we can get everybody’s questions answered and that you guys have an amazing night. I will talk with you guys soon and have a good night! Bye everybody, thank you so much!