

Going There Episode 7.2: Making It - Covid-19 and Mental Health

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A Lake Superior College podcast exploring campus mindfulness, equity, and community hosted with Tara McCoy, Steve Dalager, and Dan Riihiluoma.

In this episode, second in a two part series, we return to Alyssa Hainline as she moves forward to complete the Spring 2020 Semester. We then bring on Marie Carter Brooks, Lake Superior College Counselor, who considers Alyssa's experience and shares the mental health support that is available at LSC.

Alyssa Hainline - You know suicide is definitely not the answer, like at first, it might feel like that, but in the end, like there's so many people who would miss you.

Tara McCoy - Doing online schooling, you're finding your own place, that's a lotta shit.

Alyssa - It is, it is a lotta shit .

Marie Carter Brooks - I just want Alyssa to know that she is a phenomenal spokesperson for people with mental health issues. Mental health affects one in four people.

Tara - I'm Tara McCoy and this is part two of our COVID-19 and mental health episode.

Steve Dalager - I'm Steve Dalager, and we're gonna hear some more from Alyssa Hainline about the role that quarantine played in her decision to seek help.

Tara - We'll also hear from Marie Carter Brooks, LSC counselor. She's gonna follow with information for the rest of us about what support is available. The level of support at LSC might be more than you know.

Steve - Let's turn it over to Alyssa and Marie.

Steve - The timing of your self-hospitalization was actually just one day after we spoke to you about three weeks ago.

Alyssa -yeah.

Steve - And I wanna say when we spoke to you, I would've had no idea that you were struggling with the kinds of the things that you've talked about and yet you must've been struggling with them as we were interviewing you. Is one of your coping mechanisms the way you can mask and maybe the word might be fake it?

Alyssa - Yup, you fake it 'til you make it, 'cause I don't want people knowing what's going on, but I don't wanna like, I don't know, like feel pity for me, and I was embarrassed so I don't want people knowing like my bad decisions that I did. I definitely masked it and I think I was at that point where I didn't think I had a problem when we were talking last. I think I was aware of it, but I didn't want to admit that I had a problem yet, so I wasn't quite there yet, I wasn't hitting my rock bottom yet, so I thought that I was fine, things were fine, I didn't have an issue with drinking, I didn't have an issue with inappropriate relationships and all that, like I thought I was just totally fine, this is normal and it's not .

Steve - You've also said that you felt shame.

Alyssa - Yeah.

Steve - But here you are, talking to us and we're planning to put this on a platform where other people might be listening to it, how are you feeling about that now?

Alyssa - I just honestly hope that I can reach out to people and tell 'em you know, like don't feel alone like you're not the only one going through this and like, you have so much support and love from people who love you and you know, there's people out there that are going through a lot of things like that and are here to help you and support you and that they're not alone. You know suicide is definitely not the answer, like at first it might feel like that because it's an impulsive, irrational decision, but in the end, like there's so many people who would miss you, so many people that love you, and it's just not the right decision. And there is help out there, there is amazing groups, there is support groups, there's medications if you wanna do medications and if not, there's other things too, but there's always some type of help out there for that person.

Tara - I wanna follow up on Steve's question about you know feeling the shame and not wanting people to know what you're going through. What was the turning point for you where you decided, I'm gonna be open about my struggles and I'm gonna be open about this?

Alyssa - I think when I got sat down by one of the nurses, when I went to the Grace unit in Brainerd, they gave me a bunch of like different packets to like learn about stuff and I finally got my first diagnosis that day 'cause I did ask like symptoms, like what have you been going through and it's so crazy how easily they can just diagnose you, just by the things that you've been going through. And I think when they told me that I wasn't alone, and just knowing that I had support from them and that they weren't judging me because I mean, I'll be honest, when I hear the word bipolar, you think of someone who's manic, who up and down, up and down, and kinda crazy almost, so at first when I heard that I had that, I was like so ashamed and so scared and embarrassed and just in denial, but the lady was so sweet and just explained like a lot of people have this, it's very easy to maintain and cope with and all the support I think after I was told that it's normal and it's okay and you're not alone, I think that's when my turning point was like okay, I'm willing to get help and I'm willing to change and figure out how to live on with this disorder that I have and to have a successful life. And they told me how there's so many people, there's actresses and actors and famous people who have that and they lead successful lives and I didn't even know that.

Tara - And I really like that you pointed out that, you used the word normal. You said it's normal for people that have this, you know mental disorder essentially, as a person who teaches Abnormal Psychology where all the disorders are, there is you know a lot of talk about how the name of that class even helped continue the stigma because really, more people have some type of mental illness than not and labeling it as abnormal when it's really a normal thing to have, it just perpetuates a problematic way of thinking, so I'm really glad that you phrased it that way.

Alyssa - Exactly.

Steve - Alyssa, so you spent some time in a facility and now you're out...

Alyssa - yeah

Steve - so what therapy are you doing right now that is working for you?

Alyssa - I just have a counselor that I've been, not Zooming, but like audio for now since the whole COVID-19, so I've been talking to her once a week and then I also have a psychiatrist that I have to call and they update my medications and stuff. So I'm on Lamictal it's called and it's helped a lot. Those are the two things that I'm dealing with right now. I do have a paper that I was sent home with like things on how to cope with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, so I have a bunch of like little things that I do to keep myself busy if I ever feel like I'm going through an episode or if I'm going through like a manic phase or what not. I've learned coping skills, I'm going to see my counselor and I have a psychiatrist that I talk to.

Steve - Excellent, thank you.

Alyssa - Yeah.

Tara - First thank you so much for sharing. We all struggle with mental health problems.

Alyssa - Absolutely.

Tara - Now I wanna know how you see your future?

Alyssa - It's a little nerve wracking 'cause I'm still fairly new to this whole disorder and trying to learn how to cope with it and all that but very soon I'll be moving out. I actually got a place lined up so I'm very excited about that. So I'm learning you know more independence and it's gonna be kind of a challenge just to kind of not have my dad around, have more freedom, gets a little nerve wracking 'cause you know, freedom, that's not a responsibility, but anyways, it's besides the point though.

Steve - So you live with your dad right now?

Alyssa - I did since I got recently separated, but like you said, I'll be moving out so, I mean the ways I'm hoping I'll cope, honestly, deep down, I have to know that I'm okay being by myself and I just need to find things that make me happy. I try to distract myself if I feel anxious or if I'm feeling angry I'll either call up my mom or my dad and just have them talk me down or I'll call my counselor. Watching TV shows really helps too, it kind

of mellows that anger a little bit, I don't really have a good answer for that yet, 'cause sometimes I'm still kind of unsure.

Tara - That's exactly what I was hoping you know you might say because I think a lot of times when we highlight, and when I say we, I mean society, highlights mental illness and treatment, sometimes after somebody's got treatment and they're doing well, it seems like everything is all said and done and it's fixed, but I want to make sure that you and our listeners know that it's a process and just because things are good now doesn't mean that things are fixed 100%, that you work on it and that that's okay.

Alyssa - Yes, I agree 100% on that, absolutely.

Steve - Alyssa, you probably know this, but on Monday, Tara and I are gonna be talking with Marie Carter Brooks, who's one of the counselors from Lake Superior College about students and mental health. We'll be sharing at least a summary of our conversation with you, with her...

Alyssa - Absolutely

Steve - ... as she talks about what students should do to prepare for this very common and normal situation.

Tara - And hopefully, she'll be able to highlight some of what LSC and what the counselors there can do as well, since I've had a lot of students ask me that they didn't even know that they could see a counselor at LSC for free.

Alyssa - That'll be really nice, 'cause I know sometimes how like if you don't have the right insurance and stuff, I mean counselors can get pricey, no one really has that you know so that's super nice to know that there is a counselor that's at hands reach at LSC that you can go and get help with.

Steve - Yeah, there are actually two of them.

Alyssa - Oh that's awesome, okay, perfect.

Tara - So is there anything else you want to add or any information you wanna share before we end the conversation today Alyssa?

Alyssa - Just don't be ashamed for any kinda disorder or mental illness, it's honestly more normal than a lot of people think and they're not alone. And just seek help if you need it, don't feel embarrassed if you have to get help. It's gonna just turn your life around hopefully for the best.

Steve - And Tara you're gonna change the name of the psychology course to Normal Psychology right?

Tara - That's right, yup. Gotta get that underway.

Tara - Thank you so much Alyssa, you've been recording this whole episode with a baby on your hip and it's amazing, like you truly are an inspirational person to share this information, no seriously, to share this information and to be doing it with everything you have going on, I mean you have three kids and you're doing online schooling, you're finding your own place, that's a lot of shit.

Alyssa - It is, it's a lot of shit .

Steve - Okay, well it is great to see Liam here.

Alyssa - Yes, oh, high five.

Steve - There we go, high fives.

Alyssa - Yay .

Steve - Okay. We say goodbye to Alyssa and to baby Liam of course and we pivot now to Marie Carter Brooks, who actually was able to listen to Alyssa's interview just now, so, let's hear what Marie, counselor at Lake Superior College, has to say.

Marie Carter Brooks - My name's Marie Carter Brooks, I'm one of the two full time counselors at Lake Superior College. We provide services for career, personal issues as well as academic.

Tara - So one of the reasons that sort of prompted us to bring you on Marie was we had interviewed Alyssa. You heard a little bit of her interview and sort of the struggle she's going through. We thought it would be a good opportunity for you to share what some of the mental health resources are through counseling at LSC for students.

Marie - As I said, we have services in those three areas and probably most pertinent to this is the personal counseling. We provide brief therapy so probably what we usually look at is four to six sessions at the most and if a student needs more than that, then we would refer them on just because we don't have the capacity to do long term therapy and we're not licensed, so we do not diagnose anything with our students, that would have to come from another source. You know I've worked there 27 years, Heidi's been there I think 10 or 11 years, so we've seen a lot. We usually can tell if a student just needs some brief support. Many of our students have outside therapists as well, but they like to have a support person on campus that understands the academic side of their life and has that contact with other staff and faculty and can be an advocate for them in that aspect. So we see everything from anxiety and depression to bipolar, to schizophrenia. We see just transitional kinds of issues where students move away from their hometown for the first time and are trying to cope with all that that takes on, roommate issues.

Tara - Marie, one of the questions that I have gotten as a new faculty member is do students have to pay for these brief counseling sessions?

Marie - Great question. No, these are free, they're paid for by, their tuition and fees, and it's confidential, so both free and confidential.

Steve - Marie why is it that you have a limited number of meetings you can have with students?

Marie - Because we're only two, two of us, and we work all the year round, so that means they don't have two of us full time during the academic year, some days there's only one of us and we are involved with the career side of counseling, so undecided students see us for that. We also see all probation students and we follow up with them and that's about 300 students every fall semester, so we do an academic success plan with each of those. Because we're faculty, we're involved in different committees on campus and we just don't have the capacity to do long term.

Tara - So you would maybe say that if a student is hesitant to start counseling, you or Heidi would be a good starting point? They can get their feet wet a little bit and then, since it's not long term, they can start to seek assistance outside of LSC.

Marie - Yes I think Alyssa was great and her message was phenomenal and we need to get that out, that it's okay to ask for help and I think Heidi and I are a safe place to start and we've been around, like I said, long enough, we know our resources. We do have a lot of students who either through a referral do start to see therapists out in the community and many of our students already are connected to a therapist, but they just need that little extra support. We're also there for crisis, so when students might be starting to have or having a panic attack, we're called on to work with them. If they're feeling like they're going into crisis, many times faculty and staff are referring them or they're coming down and referring themselves.

Tara - We have a lot of PSEO students at LSC and for those of you listening, PSEO is post secondary education opportunity. Do the services with mental health at LSC, can those be applied to PSEO students, or are they only for students who are 18 and older?

Marie - No, no we do see PSEO students. If you're an enrolled student at LSC, you have the right to access our resources and so, yes PSEO, sometimes we work with non-degree seeking students, anyone enrolled is eligible.

Tara - And confidentiality stays the same, so even if you're seeing a 17 year old versus an 18 year old, I could see some students who are PSEO's being fearful that you would tell their parents perhaps something that gets disclosed, so I assume that it's still confidential, is that correct?

Marie - Yeah it's a little bit different that way in that we may need to inform the high school counselor and then just like any student, doesn't matter age, there are two criteria that the confidentiality kinda goes aside and that is if a student is going to harm themselves or going to harm someone else, but we do have that educational collaboration with the high school counselor, they may need to be aware of and we would always talk to that student about that, we wouldn't go behind their back, we would certainly be very up front with that. And then the high school counselor may need to tell their parent.

Steve - We're obviously not in a normal situation right now with the quarantine. If I'm a student and I feel like I would like to talk to you or Heidi, how does counseling work during quarantine?

Marie - Good question. We are working full time and we are available just as we would be on campus. There on our website, the counseling website, under current students. If you email us, you will get an automatic response that has a link to be able to book an appointment with us so as soon as you send that email, you don't have to wait for us to email you back, you're given that automatic response with that link, same thing with the website, it has the link to our schedules and you can schedule that. We also have on our website and in our automatic response a 1-800 number that the system office has provided mental health services 24 hours, seven days a week for anyone who feels they're in crisis and it's provided through United Healthcare and through their Optum provider and so that 1-800 number is there as well for a student, so if they are feeling in crisis at any time and especially if we're not working, they could use the access to that 800 number and get a therapist.

Steve - These counseling sessions that they would book, are they happening like we're doing now, via Zoom?

Marie - Yes, thank you. Yep, either Zoom video or if they're not comfortable, I have a lot of students who are living in a home with parents or with roommates where they're not comfortable talking and they're going outside to talk or going on a hike or in their car or wherever, then we usually use the Zoom phone 'cause it just works much better when they're in kind of even further remote places away from wifi.

Steve - And they can be more discreet that way.

Marie- Yes.

Tara - Let's talk about this discreetness. Going back to when we spoke to Alyssa. She was apprehensive to seek treatment because she felt shameful and embarrassed and we had a little bit of a conversation about how it's normal to have bouts with mental illness, but we still see people wanting to hide that or to hide their treatment and so Marie, maybe you could speak to how common it is, one to have mental illness treatment and two, why people feel the need to hide their struggles. Or hide the fact that they're getting help.

Marie - As you pointed out with Alyssa, you hear the statistics that mental health affects one in four people, sometimes you hear one in five, and so it's much more common than we think it is. Steve knows this 'cause I go

into developmental classes every year. We talk about what makes a successful student and what makes a successful student is that someone asks for help when needed, whether that be from their instructor, that be from an advisor, that be from a counselor, but we are stoic Midwesterners and we grow up with the thought that we are supposed to do everything ourselves and not ask for help and so I ask students to think about what if it was your best friend or a good friend? What would you tell your friend? Would you tell them to talk with someone? So treat yourself like you would treat your good friend. And that's a life skill, asking for help is a life skill. So the sooner we learn that, the better, and then when we're strong, we're able to help the other person. It's a stigma that's out there, we'd like people to start looking at it like if a student had diabetes, would they be ashamed of that, because that's ongoing. And that needs help at different times for different things and so that's the same with mental health, it's a long term, ongoing, chronic situation sometimes that they need extra help at different times and they seek that help and so we'd like them to kinda think about it that way.

Steve - Marie, who counsels the counselors?

Marie - Great question.

Steve - Or are they just always strong Midwesterners who don't need help?

Marie - No, no, no, I learned at an early age to take good care of myself, sometimes people get into this profession and they're not healthy and so it is important that you find someone that is healthy that you're working with and I do a lot of self-care, especially even more now in the COVID, but certainly taking care of myself physically, exercising, same things I talk to students about. How are you moving your body, how are you releasing stress? What are you eating, how are you sleeping? Do you have good sleep habits? So all those things that we can do even naturally is very important for someone who's a caretaker. I also am fortunate to have very good friends and family that I turn to or talk to my coworkers. Practicing all of what I preach hopefully.

Tara - Yeah I think it's a common misconception that if you're in the mental health field or if you are a psychology teacher that because you have the information, that you don't need to utilize it or you

don't need to seek out additional help, which is absolutely false.

Marie - I'll tell you now with this and being at home because I don't have to commute to work, I have that time. I belong to a five-minute meditation group everyday and I'm doing more yoga, there's fitness classes online that I usually, a couple times a week, try to partake in as well in addition to my morning exercise. For all of us, there's more stress right now so you have to use more tools to work through that stress.

Steve - Well I'm glad you're taking care of yourself. Do you have anything you wanna say to Alyssa specifically?

Marie - I just want Alyssa to know that she is a phenomenal spokesperson for people with mental health issues and she has come a long way and I think the most important thing I heard from her though was that she doesn't have it all together. I get worried about the students who say oh I went to treatment and now I'm really good and everything's fine and that's not life, that's not how it comes. So the fact that she is still workin' on it and will continue to and knows the importance of asking for that help and being able to do that and seeing that as a strength, I just hope she keeps sharing that because students will listen to her before they'll listen to me. But I do want them to know, I'm hoping that they hear my voice and know that we're friendly people. My highlights of my day are helping students, that's what gives me satisfaction. We want to help.

Tara - One last question, what is some advice that you wanna leave with our students and faculty and staff?

Marie - Well I listen to a psychologist from Duluth on Friday and it's something I know, but you forget, and that is that none of us asked for this virus, none of us asked for COVID-19, that it's something we can't control. Now what we can control is how we respond to it. We can choose to be miserable or we can choose not to be. You know, what can you control? I can control how I respond to it and if I'm really feeling stressed out and overwhelmed, I can choose to get some help and ask for the help I need and those tools and use those tools that I might already have to alleviate some of that stress. That would be my advice at this time.

Steve - Tara after listening to Alyssa's experience and then Marie's take on it, what sticks with you?

Tara - Honestly what sticks with me most is something I noted about both Alyssa and Marie highlighting the fact that seeking treatment is important but it's not going to just fix itself after one session or two sessions, it's a prolonged journey essentially to maintain mental health.

Steve - LSC provides counseling for our students, but it is limited. I think Marie said four to six sessions and then, for that ongoing mental health support, students are gonna have to seek a different provider, which is unfortunate, but it's just the reality of the situation.

Tara - Mhmm, I don't have the statistic available with me though. It's fairly common for individuals not to go past four sessions, even if they're seeking help outside of a college setting, so the four to six sessions seems pretty reasonable.

Steve - Well that's good to know. I'm glad to hear that, I didn't realize that. Another thing that strikes me though is you know I think it was a revelation to Alyssa that she could've sought counseling at LSC, via our LSC counselors Heidi and Marie.

Tara - Yeah and I don't know if students have been pretending with me this year when I tell them about counseling, but most of them, they have been surprised, and so I hope that this episode and those who are listening spread this message that there is counseling available to students, free of charge.

Steve - Yes, I wanna say in wrapping up here that I hope you have a really successful attempt to change the name of your Abnormal Psychology course to Normal Psychology.

Tara - Or just Psychological Disorders, that's a pretty common replacement for Abnormal Psych.

Steve - With that, let's sign off.

Tara - All right, sounds good Steve.

Steve - All right, bye bye.

Tara - Bye.

Steve - You've been listening to Going There, our special COVID-19 and mental health episode. Special thanks to

Marie Carter Brooks, Alyssa Hainline, and baby Liam who was cooing in there a little bit too. On behalf of Tara McCoy and Dan Rehamoma, co-hosts of Going There, thank you for listening. If you wanna get in touch with Going There or have question or a comment, please contact us at my email address, that would be steven.dalager@lsc.edu, Dalager is spelled D-A-L-A-G-E-R. Mic drop.