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Cheryl Zelle

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Adult Education (and Educators) and the Mental Health Crisis

Cheryl Zelle¹

¹Adult Learning and Leadership, Kansas State University, Kansas, United States

Abstract

The field of adult education needs to engage in deep reflection and discourse about adult educators' role in responding to the mental health crisis in higher education.

Keywords: Adult educators, mental health, well-being, COVID pandemic, higher education.

By writing an autoethnography for my doctoral dissertation, I chose to tell the story of my personal mental health experience as both a student and adult educator during the COVID pandemic. Kim (2016) describes how autoethnography provides experiential insights “embedded in a larger social and cultural context.” That larger context is the subject of this call to action.

Mental Health and Well-Being: Conversations in Adult and Higher Education

As adult educators, we learned to adjust and adapt to new realities during the COVID pandemic. Meanwhile, the world was – and still is – facing another health crisis that continues to increase in prevalence and severity. While the threat of COVID has diminished three years after its onset (Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs [ASPA] 2023), the mental health crisis continues to escalate. Unfortunately, there is no do-it-yourself at-home test kit for mental illness someone can take if they are not feeling well and get a quick positive or negative result.

The Mental Health Epidemic

While isolation largely protected us from the contagion of COVID, it likely exacerbated struggles with mental health. In 2020, 55% of higher education students in the U.S. experienced symptoms of depression, 74% had anxiety symptoms, and 66% were affected by sleep disturbances (Deng et al., 2021). Lederer et al. (2021) cite suicide as the second leading cause of death within the collegiate population. In 2020, over 25% of adults ages 18 to 24 reported having seriously considered suicide in the past month (Czeisler et al., 2020), and the sharpest incline in suicide rates occurred among adults aged 25 to 34 (Curtin and Ahmad, 2021). The COVID pandemic forced us, in many ways, to instantly and radically change how we practiced our craft to serve our students' learning needs, and we did our best to adapt and overcome. Do we have the same responsibility to our students during this mental health crisis?

Is It Our Place to Get Involved?

As adult educators, not psychologists or counselors, we may feel ill-equipped to step into the mental health arena. Is it even our battle to fight? Research indicates there are not enough mental health experts to go around, resulting in a substantial unmet need for treatment of mental health conditions in higher education (Lederer et al., 2021). Given the enormity of the crisis, adult learners need us to step up. A report by the Council of Graduate Students and the JED Foundation (2021) indicates a large majority of faculty members would welcome additional professional development or training so they feel better prepared to support students' mental health and well-being.

Explore Current Narratives and Engage in Ongoing Dialogue

If we had done nothing to change how we practiced our profession during the COVID pandemic, we would have epically failed our students, and probably lost our jobs. Likewise, we cannot maintain status quo now, as we battle yet another insidious epidemic that will not be eradicated by vigilant hand-washing and quarantines. One useful byproduct of the pandemic is that it began to normalize conversations about mental health. While much of life has returned to normal (or settled into a new normal) after COVID, we cannot afford to go back to normal where mental health is concerned. As I near the end of my personal storytelling journey, I issue this call to action so that others will join and extend the conversation. With the field of adult education as our scene, we have a compelling story to tell of educators joining forces to confront the mental health crisis in service to and support of our students, colleagues, and friends.

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