Caregivers need self care, too!

Welcome everyone. I am so glad you have joined us today.

My name is Sue Full and I will be your hospitality host for this session.

The session is Caregivers Need Self-Help Too and it is my privilege to introduce our speaker for today. It is, Laura Pennington. She is joining us as a community health educator with Mental Health, America, in Eastern Missouri. She served the St. Louis Community for her entire professional career, focusing on Behavioral Health, prevention and Wellness. Laura is also a provider at Palm health, an Integrative Medical Practice in St. Louis and an adjunct instructor at Saint Louis University in the School of Social Work. Prior to her work in preventive health and wellness, Laura served as CEO of Queen of Peace Center, a family-centered behavioral

Organization for women and children.

Laura, it is our pleasure to have you here with us today. And thank you so much, and I'm going to turn the presentation over to you.

Wonderful. Thank you, Sue. And welcome everyone. I'm so glad that you've carved out a moment or 35 minutes or so of your day, to take care of yourself and to focus on your own well-being. So hopefully this afternoon and evening, or wherever in the world you are you walk away with some useful and very practical tools and resources to begin your health Journey.

So as Sue mentioned I'm a social worker, I'm a health coach by training as well. And so these principles that we will review today are deeply important for me and my well-being and have been of critical necessity in order to be able to be able to serve the community and many of you, I understand, are caregivers or professionals who are giving of your time and your energy in the service of others.

And so, but this time today, be a minute for your own self care. A bit about the organization that I represent. I'm part of Mental Health, America, of Eastern Missouri, and our Focus really is on the promotion of mental health and access to services, and we do that through leadership and education as well as advocacy and direct service, this particular seminar being part of our educational offering to the community.

So in terms of what will accomplish this evening and it will go by quickly, we are going to review the different types of distress that we can experience as caregivers, and specifically, really focus on compassion fatigue, which is a particular type of distress that can come after prolonged stress and care for other people.

And then we'll spend time discussing and really building your motivation to take action for your self-care and wellness. So this is a seminar, it's, you know, primarily educational in nature and it's 30 minutes seminar in and of itself is insufficient really in and making changes in your life. But I hope that it ignites a light kind of sparks some motivation and allows you to take action with some courage, and hopefully,

Calm and serenity.

So I think it's important that we, you know, just frame up the challenging times in which we are living, right? That we don't exist in a silo or a vacuum and these larger systemic stressors are impacting us, and our ability to tolerate stress.

So it's not a normal for our Baseline level of stress to look different than it did even two years ago. We’re more easily triggered and experiencing worry and anxiety and fear. And grief, and not necessarily grief due to a loss of life, but to due to a loss of routine and stability.

And so remembering that we are sensitive beings who are impacted by these larger systemic stressors and keeping that in mind as we learn to respond to stress, mitigate the stress and care for self. In terms of the types of distress that will discuss this evening, there's burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue. And as mentioned, we spend the bulk of the time on compassion fatigue.

So, what is burnout? So, burnout can actually happen in any field. You can be in accounting and finance. You can be a medical provider.

You can be a counselor and or a development executive and experience Burnout. It originated in the business field but it can happen in any field and it refers to the physical and emotional exhaustion that comes from prolonged stress and frustration.

So I think it's safe to say that most of us have experienced prolonged stress as a result of the last year and a half. And so this kind of state of burnout, we're seeing sharp rising increase in the experience of burnout across different sectors. It results in reduced feelings of personal accomplishment, diminishment of self-care, detachment and cynicism. So you can experience compassion fatigue, which will discuss more about today and burn out together and more than likely, if you are experiencing compassion fatigue, so too, are you experiencing burnout. You could experience burnout without compassion fatigue.

Vicarious trauma is when a person is continuously exposed to someone else's trauma. When you're walking side by side with someone in a clinical and professional capacity, whether it's education, it's health care, it's counseling, just to name a few. And their experience of trauma. You begin to integrate. And as such you have manifestations of similar traumatic symptoms, whether they be intrusive thoughts, or images popping into your head, dreams. You may even begin to avoid certain people or activities that begin to trigger you. So it's important to recognize with vicarious trauma is that the trauma itself of the other, gets kind of ingrained and triggered in you to the point of symptom manifestation. And so this does require a clinical level of care for most people.

And then compassion fatigue. So when someone who regularly hears our witnesses very difficult and traumatic stories begins to lose their ability to feel empathy and that's kind of the unique identifier with compassion fatigue. Is that diminishment of compassion, that gift, that is been ever present in your life and in service to others, it's a feeling of nothing left to give and it can be misdiagnosed as depression. The most caring of individuals tend to be those who are at risk for compassion fatigue, more likely to develop compassion fatigue. And we'll spend some time taking an assessment today. So, you can gauge your risk in, or the existence of compassion fatigue in your own life. So I think it's important to frame up and define what we mean by compassion and fatigue, and to recognize that compassion in and of itself is one of our greatest gifts, it's one of our greatest Joys.

This quote, I love, it's an important tool of the survival Instinct. It's an essential building block for Morality and an unmistakable call to action. Without it, we would be empty, selfish, rudderless, and probably bored.

So, I'm going to ask you all to reflect on both in the context of this session, but really outside of here as you go on about your days.

After this conference is to reflect on how compassion and yours or someone else's has supported your own well-being or your survival.

And then the role that compassion has played in your life and your work, or in your sense of purpose. So here, we're taking really the strength based approach, right?

That compassion is a gift and it's something that particularly in humans, but no doubt in mammals, right? It allows us to be attentive to the needs of others, and to be responsive to those needs.

It's what lifts us up and builds Community. It's what keeps us connected even in the most difficult of times.

So what do you do when that compassion begins to decline? And that’s what we will discuss this evening in terms of strategies.

So then what stress? And fatigue. So, it's important to distinguish both stress and the stress response, right? As long as we are living breathing human beings, we are going to experience stress. It's an inevitable part of the human experience. And then there's our stress response, right?

Our physiological response to a threat. So we are hard-wired to tolerate temporary stress and even temporary and acute stress can be good for our health, but it's really when we get into that chronic state of stress, over a prolonged period of time, when we start to suffer. It's important to keep in mind that our body is constantly seeking equilibrium through a variety of complex adaptive systems and that prolonged stress can break can result in a breakdown of these symptoms and impact us not only physically but psychologically, socially and spiritually.

And so again, some reflection questions for you to consider now and moving forward, how do you feel under mild moderate and temporary stress? How do you feel and respond to prolong, stress?

And then, how can you tell when your life is out of balance? Whether that's physically, or mentally, emotionally. It's important to know your warning signs, your window of tolerance in terms of stress and to realize and recognize that many of us, especially in this last year, our window of tolerance may have changed.

So what are some warning signs?

And I ask that you have take self-inventory for the next couple of slides with some self-compassion and try to limit the judgment or condemnation that may wake make its way through your thoughts. So, warning signs include perfectionism, you know, the pursuit of perfection is always going to result in in self-defeat and it's exhausting, excessive ruminations. So thoughts that just that don't feel productive in nature, Any exhaustion, that results from overwork, right? So many people who participate in these particular seminars on compassion fatigue are both caring for others and work in caring for others in their home life.

Sleep disturbance. Recognizing that it can be both a cause and a symptom and then anxiety or depression, anger directed towards self or others, irritability, feeling guilty when you take time off, even though that could be precisely what is needed. It's hard to take on additional tasks when your brain feels flooded and overwhelmed. A sense of loss or helpless. Professional disillusionment and cynicism. And this feeling of being withdrawn or isolated from other people.

So now I'm going to ask you to complete this brief self-assessment. So it consists of 22 questions. We will start with the first eleven. And to honestly insert each on a scale of one to three, one, being very true to somewhat true in three, rarely true. And so, if you have a pen and a paper, you're in a position to take a note of your responses, please do so now.

And I'll gauge your progress here in a minute and then we'll go on to the second half of the self-assessment.

Okay, let's look at the second half. Questions 12 through 22. Answering in the same way on a scale from 1 to 3.

It's important to remember when answering these questions that certain items in and of the themselves, right, they're not bad. So try to think outside of that good or bad dichotomy in recognizing that this is just an opportunity to observe and take self-inventory of different, what could be considered strengths, right? Or ways of responding to people and situations that could place you at greater risk.

So out of these 22 questions, I want you to tally up the number of times, you answered very true. And as this particular assessment is the way that it’s measured, if you score eight or more on very true, it's an indicator that you need self-care and a Wellness Plan and just strategies that mitigate your risk.

I would propose that you consider any one of the questions where you answered very true and to give some time, attention, and thought around how you can put a plan in place or strategies in place to care for self.

So whether it's 2 to 10 or Beyond, it's an indicator for yourself of your need for Rejuvenation and in self-care.

So thinking about some myths, you know whether you're a caregiver for a family member or you're working in a professional capacity for a patient.

You know, we sometimes take on more than our capacity and sometimes we have this sense of invincibility, right? This compassion is a gift and it's a superpower but we too get exhausted.

So what are some of these myths? One myth is that stress is viewed as something that can be overcome versus managed, again, stress is inevitable part of our lived experience and so remembering that part of our work and well-being is to increase our tolerance to stress or work on diversifying our stress management skills, because stress will always be a part of our Lives to some degree.

We impose unrealistic expectations on ourselves. We work harder and longer hours to offset any guilt or shame that we have. And we push ourselves to the Limit without knowing or clearly identifying the nature of our limitations.

So that's the key. Do we even know what our limit is? And are we sticking to that limit or consistently pushing ourselves past it?

One major myth is that we avoid asking for help or willing to give it, but not necessarily to receive it. And then perfectionism, it shows up again.

So we know that Wellness or self-care should be a priority, but we don't always put it in practice. We don't view it as a necessity. Sometimes we view it as a luxury.

We know that helping people whether it's in a professional or personal capacity is stressful, and yet we're constantly putting others needs before our own. We know in theory that a balanced life is critical for our personal and professional lives and yet we overextend ourselves, you know, we're constantly working. Time that should otherwise be dedicated for self, or home, or family. We know that it’s beneficial in our personal lives and our career to integrate self-care. And yet we view self-care as I mentioned, as a luxury, or as expendable, whether, like sleep in this case, we work late into the evenings or care late into the evenings and forget to give ourselves that necessary down time for calm and restoration. We always begin tomorrow. And then tomorrow never comes and then, of course, many of us over time have accumulated strategies, some of which may not always be healthy in nature. So not as a point of self-criticism but just growing in awareness of what unhealthy coping strategies you may currently be using.

So when we talk about this prescription so to speak, for compassion fatigue, we're really talking about the combination of wellness and resilience. Knowing that these are inborn qualities, right?

Resilience is the capacity within us to adapt and change through stressful times. And wellness is, you know, a state of being. Taking care of our Wellness is an action.

So this kind of gets into the call to action portion of our evening.

When we talk about Wellness, we're talking about taking action. All of these diverse areas of our Lives, recognizing that were more than just our body or our minds, right, or what gives us meaning and purpose, for all of those things, in a very integrated way. So when we talk about Wellness, we're talking about who we are within that larger context, physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, social, and environmental.

When we talk about Wellness, we're looking at this Paradigm or this Continuum here. Recognizing that health is not just the absence of disease. It's also the existence of well-being. That we can be sick or suffering and still work on our wellness. And it may be precisely be work on Wellness that lifts us up in the most challenging of times.

It's a sign of wisdom and not weakness to take this type of self-inventory to assess our need for assistance, to develop new coping strategies and to recognize that what our needs Were ten years ago may be different then what they may be now. And consistently adapting to meet those changing needs throughout the course of Our Lives.

We want together this evening to put together an initial Wellness Plan.

That's not going to be one more stressor, but that will contribute towards the renewal of your energy. So thinking very practically and realistically around what you can integrate into your daily life, that will increase your motivation and not be a source of Burden. We went to look at this is not just avoiding burnout, but moving towards, you know, thriving where we otherwise may just be in the surviving or survival mode.

So at this part of the evening we're going to switch gears and talk about different Wellness strategies across different life domains. And so my ask of you, ideally, if you have a pen and paper or some means to take notes in order to commit to action, is to within each of these areas of wellness, just pick one thing. One thing that you can commit to. And again its realistic, that it's a source of motivation for you that it's personal that it poses enough challenge, but that it challenges you enough without defeating you. So one goal within each of these life domains.

So physical wellness. We start here in a state of stress. It's important to keep in mind that when we are triggered, in an active state of stress, that one of the most important actions to be taken, is on the appeasement of our physical body that stress is a Physiological response.

And when we are stressed out, our prefrontal cortex is offline, or typically working from our emotional brain, our limbic brain, and we're not able to think long term, whether it's about abstract thought long-term decision making and problem solving. So one of the most important things that we can do in a state of stress, is to calm our bodies down and in so doing, we are bringing our brains full capacity online, so we can begin to think more clearly and be steady on our feet.

So from a self-care and Wellness Plan approach starting with work on the

body can be sometimes the most effective way to appease any type of mental agitation. And one of the quickest points of access for relaxation is through breathing.

So if you'll join me this evening, I'll ask that you put a hand on your stomach and a hand on your chest and this is just for the observation of movement. Both the movement of your belly and the movement of your chest. And when we talk about deep breathing here we're really talking about engaging in diaphragmatic and belly breathing. So your diaphragm sits within your ribcage on the inhale and moves down, pushes the abdominal region out on the exhale. It moves back in when we're strapped, when we're tense, we tend to breathe more from our chest, so in this type of relaxation and breathing, we want to engage the belly. So just breathe in through your nose.

Out through the mouth. In through the nose.

Out through the mouth.

And continue on here.

In this way.

Observing which hand is doing more of the movement.

Hopefully, it's the hand on your belly.

Only breathing to about 3/4 capacity, so no need to over extend your lungs.

No need to hold your breath.

In through the nose.

And out through the mouth.

So, believe it or not, even five minutes of this three to five minutes of this can down regulate a stress response, and upregulate your relaxation response. If you found it difficult to engage your belly through the inhale, right pushing your belly out, sometimes it helps to lay down.

So you may want to consider laying on the floor or on your bed night before you go to sleep.So breath work is a very effective way to regain your sense of groundedness and clarity.

Another is just a physiological side, so you may recognize this as I do it.But it's to Shorter inhales to the nose and then a deep Long Exhale out through the mouth.

So you may recognize that that's typically the type of breathing we do naturally when, after we cry. So that's another great way to regulate your stress exercise.

So it's important to remember when our stress response system is activated, right, that means we're ready to fight or flee or freeze. And so taking action, getting in your body and moving is really critical part of kind of completing that stress response cycle in restoring a sense of calm, and relaxation. So you lean into the tension, engaging in cardiovascular exercise and that activity alone can help. Restore a sense of calm.

Of course, it should go without saying, but so many of us are helping others and and the scheduling of their doctor's appointments, or dentist, appointments, or counseling appointments, and we're not always scheduling our own.

And then sleep. We know to reboot computers and different machines, but we don't always give ourselves the opportunity to reboot and so establishing a routine sleep pattern when it's possible to do so.

Recognizing that caffeine and alcohol and sugar can increase our stress and agitation. And so just being mindful of your intake of those substances. And if you have a tendency to kind of lean into them as a source of coping, being mindful about what you eat, you know, we don't always think of food as a source of fuel and nutrition.

And so observing what foods give you greater energy and Clarity versus the foods that leave you foggy in the brain or tired and lethargic.

Drinking water. It's important to remember, you know, we are, we're physical creatures, of course, and not dissimilar from mammals when we're hungry, when we're sleepy, when we're thirsty, there's a natural built-in stress response. In that stress response it's our body's way of telling us we have a need to be met. And so when you're hungry, when you need to go to the restroom, when you're thirsty, there is that increase of adrenaline and until you get that biological need met, you are going to experience some agitation.

And so we don't always listen to our biological needs much less meet them. And so one way just to diminish the presence of stress on a day-to-day basis is by allowing those biological needs of yours to be met with consistency, knowing that when you do so you're diminishing some kind of daily source of stress.

Engaging in physical activities that help calm you. That help restore,

your sense of clarity. And you know whether that's massage, taking a bath, engaging and personal training, some type of physical activity that helps restore calm and relaxation. Again, remembering that sometimes the best way for us to reduce mental agitation is by way of the body and in a state of calm we’re more equipped to take on the stressors of day-to-day life. It doesn't take a vacation to help restore a sense of calm. And so just many breaks throughout your day when you are engaged in intense focus on the care of other people or a task at hand, it's important to remember that we need time to step away from highly focused activity for unfocused time. That is important in your neurological processes and just allowing your brain to rest, and file, and store all of the important information that you're taking in Moment by moment.

In terms of Behavioral Wellness, giving yourself permission to ask for help, spending time by yourself, or spending time with others, ideally, with others that can fulfill you. If you find yourself in a position where you're constantly the rock in your relationships, it may be nice to think about, you know, diversifying your social relationships to include those relationships of people that help fulfill you and may not necessarily require something of you. And so that brings us back to identifying what your limitations are in terms of the demands for your time and your energy. Not being rigid in your boundaries or limitations, but just recognizing that they exist, listening to them and trying to create a schedule throughout the course of your day or week that gives you a little bit more down time.

And doing activities that you enjoy.

So, you know, one of the things we tend to do and it's another source of stress and I'm hearing this a lot for people who are navigating this new territory, you know, post kind of this quarantine and socially restrictive life.

What are those activities that you enjoy and that fulfill you?

We may have a tendency to kind of over schedule and engage entirely too many obligatory activities and so how can you build into your week or your day activities that you enjoy? Even simple things like taking different routes to meetings to appointments, believe it or not, the challenge that can pose to your brain in navigating new geography, or just exposing yourself to New Territory, can be important. When you are in a state of burnout, you may feel like you again, have this diminished sense of capacity and interest in work.

If you've experienced just a series of failures, it can also contribute to that as well. And so, as you consider developing goals, right, we know that goals are critical part of what allows you to grow and hope and self-efficacy. And so taking action is a really important part of restoring your sense of well-being. When you set those goals, to think about a, are they real? And what contingency plans can you put in place if it's difficult to achieve them.

Ten minute warning.

Thank you.

Breaking tasks into smaller ones. So it's important to keep in mind, again back to the goal setting, that when we establish goals, when we achieve them, it helps improve, kind of boost our sense of hope. When we achieve those goals it also gives us that kind of burst of not the kind of burst of dopamine, it gives us a burst of dopamine. And so that can help down-regulate stress and also is like fuel in your internal reward system that allows you to keep going.

Emotional and social Wellness. So just allowing yourself to experience, what you feel. Again, so many of us have a sense of condemnation and judgment towards what we feel and think and what we do. And so just creating some space for awareness, just growing it awareness around you're feeling and getting curious around that. Instead of just immediately responding to your feelings with judgment, just get curious about it to observe it and to build in some source of validation where need be. It's important sometimes to label what we're experiencing when we have vocabulary around our experiences, it can help us a) in our identification of the real source of the problem and allow us to more accurately take action that's responsive to that problem or that need.

Remain in open and honest communication with yourself, first and foremost. And then with others around you. And to begin to develop some skills around assertive communication. So here's a kind of perfect, you know, example of that. There's like an assertive communication formula: I feel (blank), when you (blank) because can we consider doing XYZ.

So “I” statements is a helpful way of being able to communicate what you need and how you feel in a way that reduces a sense of defensiveness on the part of the person with whom you're speaking.

A sense of humor is an important part of restoring a sense of levity and lightness, and the stress of our day-to-day lives.

Hugs, hugs and physical affection are an incredible strategy for the restoration of calm and the reduction of the stress response.

So it reminds, it tells your body that you're safe, that you're secure.

And then in terms of spiritual Wellness, so give some consideration to your why, what's that deeper meaning and purpose that can allow you to sustain your efforts, even when they feel diminished.

By getting out in nature, is a wonderful way to restore your sense of connectivity. To just exist in Wonder and awe at the world and its beauty especially when we're experiencing great hardship. It can help with our perspective.

Mindfulness in the day-to-day grind of our busy lives, we're Mindful and not always aware, and so, being more present and attentive to what's going on in your life around you.

And then spending time and Delight, who, or what Delights you? Who or what Delights you and how can you carve out time in your life for those experiences of delight? The experience of self-transcendence, again whether it's through nature, or art, culture, or literature. It helps with your perspective, reminds you that we're connected and that we are not the only ones who have suffered and struggled in life and that there's this tremendous capacity within the human spirit for resilience and perseverance. And then of course to seek out support when you need it.

And hopefully today provided a bit of support for you.

So at this point in the evening we’re at the Q&A, so I understand that this portion will be moderated. Please do speak up. Communicate what questions you have. What thoughts, or comments you wish to share as well. Know that, you know, what we shared this evening is not an exhaustive list but hopefully was a springboard for you to take action for your own self-care.

Laura, thank you so much for the informative presentation.

I do have a few questions from the chat.

First of all, I did want to say that one of the comments in there was just the label of compassion fatigue was very helpful. I also found myself thinking that was really interesting and a way to form in your mind and I think going back to what you said about the pandemic and just what everyone's been through. There's probably a lot of people suffering with that, right. I know that we have to your point, people that work with people at their job and provide support. We also have people that are caregivers for people at home dealing with disease or illness. And one of the comments was, how do we get, like, most people probably realize that they have some kind of stressor? How do you get past just continuing doing the whole thing? I guess, how do you break the cycle or give any advice about that break?

Can you clarify what “cycle” means?

What I took away was more like if you are in this stress-inducing world, you know, whether it's compassion fatigue, burnout, and you can realize, you can look at the list of things that you say to do, but you still stay in your usual routine that is still developing stress in your life.

Like, how do you break, how do you get out of that and start prioritizing yourself, I guess?

Yeah.

So I think that is a big question with a lot of layers and I think most importantly, it takes time and action. Step-by-step pursuit towards wellness. I mean that’s not like a state to be achieved, but the action itself which comes with high points and low points. And in and of itself can be full of a lot of resistances and achievements.

So that's important to keep in mind that it's a Daily Commitment. In terms of the actual stress response cycle, so, as I mentioned, we have stress and the stress response cycle, and the stress response cycle is our body's natural physiological response to stress. And so when we are faced with a threat our physiological functions are mobilized and they're activated to respond to that stress. And what happens for most of us is that we get caught in that actual stress response cycle and we don't move through it. So, there’s a great book called Burnout by Emily and Amelia Nagoski, and they talked about the stress response cycle and how we get

stuck in the stress response cycle. And like a tunnel, we have to move all the way through it, to get to the other side. And so just as our stresses in our physiological functions are activated and mobilized we also have to move through a process of deactivation and restoration. So it's important to keep in mind if you're in an active state of stress, that one of the most effective things that you can do are to engage in activities that down-regulate stress, that deactivate your stress response, and that help you restore your sense of calm.

And so physical activity being one of the most effective ways to, you know, to complete the stress response cycle. Physical affection, a good cry. A good laugh, breathing, artistic and creative expression. So, in short, I think the first step in breaking the cycle is actually to complete the stress response cycle in the moment when you are in an activated state of stress. And then in that calm state, when you're thinking more clearly begin to navigate your life with that clear-headed, hopefully more balanced footing and that it's a proposed step-by-step action.

So hopefully, you know, the person who asked this can identify one or two things on that on the Wellness Plan that you wish to incorporate into your life and in so doing that, it gives you that additional courage and fortification to keep going

I'm hoping, I interpreted the question because they were looking for something a little bit beyond the things that were listed on the PowerPoint.

So, hopefully, to the person who put that question in this helped kind of take that to the next level to say, how to, you know, I can understand where I am in my life and how do I bridge the gap between those two things?

I would say, you know, and this is why I give the disclaimer in terms of a seminar, a seminar could be effective, but I think for long-term sustainable change, like in actually reducing that gap between where you are and your goals. That's where I think for the support of a counselor or coach can be really helpful. Just getting that additional support to begin to close that Gap in your life?

Perfect.

Thank you.

I think that is all the questions. I do think we are at time.

Also, I did want to point out that she does have her contact information on the screen, so if you wanted the name to the book that she recommended or any other things for follow-up, you can contact her there.

Laura, thank you so much for your information.