

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Carrie Brown:

I think one of the things that we're seeing, not just at Syracuse, but across the board when we look at our national data on college mental health, is we're really seeing an uptick in social anxiety. One of the things that people are saying is their number one thing that they're worried about is how other people perceive them. So when we think of social anxiety, sometimes we think of people being very introverted, and certainly that can be a part of it. But what was really interesting is what students were sharing is they were really more worried about how their peers perceive them. I think social media plays a role into that. There's this expectation that everybody is living an extraordinary life and everybody is doing everything the right way and looks great all the time. I think that that distorts the reality that most of us are really underneath it all just wanting to connect and wanting to be happy. It's a challenge sometimes, I think, not to get in our own heads. That filter prevents us from being our authentic self, which prevents us from connecting.

John Boccacino:

Our guest on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast today is Carrie Brown, the counseling director at the Barnes Center at The Arch here at Syracuse University. Carrie also serves on the Counseling Sexual and Relationship Violence Response Team, and she is here today to pull the curtain back on a very pertinent topic that affects many of our students and honestly, faculty and staff members here at Syracuse University too. The topic is social anxiety that comes from making new friends and finding that community here on campus. Carrie, before we dive into this week's topic, give our audience a little background on yourself. What are your primary responsibilities as counseling director?

Carrie Brown:

Sure. Yeah, so first and foremost, thank you for having me. I'm the director of counseling, as you mentioned, and I've been with the university for 11 years. So I've been in the role of director for I think going on two or three years. But I've held a lot of various roles in our counseling center, from staff therapist to assistant director, to clinic director, to now the director. So a lot of my role is around really supporting mental health and wellness efforts across the campus community. So while I am the director of our department and oversee our department, I work a lot with campus stakeholders and partners as well.

So a lot of what I do often is more external facing actually and outside of the center in terms of really working with the campus community to think about mental health as a community-wide responsibility. Here at the Barnes Center, we really see mental health as a holistic way of treating mental health and really thinking of it as a public health initiative. So our mindset is certainly the people of Barnes Center Counseling are the experts in the area and are the providers, but it's the campus community that's working together with one another to really create a mentally well campus for our students and so-

John Boccacino:

When you say the word holistic development, that gets thrown around a lot to mean a lot of different things to different departments or representatives here on campus. What role does a student's wellness play in their development once they're here on campus?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, I think it's huge. Yeah, I agree. I think holistic is thrown around a lot and really when we think about it from the Barnes Center lens, we're really thinking about how people are holistic beings in terms of your mental health and physical health and all that comes in together. You can't really foster one without the other. So we really think that there are four main things that we're looking at when it comes to health and wellness, and one is sense of belonging because we know that that is huge, sense of belonging, sense of community. One is having some sense of purpose, so what gives your life meaning? What makes you get out of bed in the morning. The other is looking at physical health, really looking at how do you take care of your body through exercise, through nutrition, through sleep, through different health initiatives, and the other is emotional health.

Certainly, when we think about emotional health, we can think about mental health of course, but it's also about how well do you manage stress? How well do you regulate your emotions? How well do you just work with the adversities that we all face in life? Let's face it, going through this life where you're going to run into adversity and challenge and you really need those skills to be able to make it through those adversities and those challenges. So I think when we think about holistic health and wellness, we're really thinking about it in that lens and those ideas. I think we see the campus community as really playing a part in that, not just the Barnes Center, but our faculty, our staff, our students, and how they're able to cultivate wellness through those areas.

John Boccacino:

What was it about this opportunity and this campus, what drew you to Syracuse in the first place?

Carrie Brown:

Well, first and foremost, just to be transparent, I am from central New York. I actually grew up in western New York, but I was born in Auburn, originally, lived in a really small town called Brock, which a lot of people probably don't know where that is. It's near Moravia, New York, which is about 30 minutes, I think, near Auburn, but grew up west of Rochester in a town called Brockport and really wanted to be closer to my family. I had been away for, gosh, at that point a decade about getting my education and doing some internships in other states and really wanted to relocate back to Upstate New York. I love it here. That's really where I feel the most at home, so that's what drew me to Syracuse initially. As I mentioned, I started here 11 years ago as a staff therapist and then just fell in love with the culture of the university, especially our Student Experience Team and portfolio.

Just thinking about how much the people who work in Student Experience really do care about the student and how we're creating such innovative and new ways of really looking at things. I've never been bored in my job. It always feels like there's something new to explore, something new to try. I love being in higher ed. I think there's so much passion and excitement and learning and curiosity, and so it just keeps me growing and keeps me being challenged. I'm somebody who likes to grow and be challenged. I don't like to be stagnant and feeling like I'm not doing meaningful work. I feel like the work that we're doing here at Barnes Center is extraordinarily meaningful. So that's what drew me here, and that's what keeps me here.

John Boccacino:

If you had to encapsulate it, knowing your love for higher education and knowing that this is a topic that really has been on the rise, this mental wellness, this mental well-being is a critical aspect of students' developments, what is it about... before we dive into some of the problems, let's look at some of the

positives here. What do we do really well on campus when it comes to addressing issues of mental health and mental well-being?

Carrie Brown:

I think here at the Barnes Center, we

John Boccacino:

It's reassuring to hear the wealth of resources, but also the diversified approach that we take to the mental health. Before we go a little further on down the rabbit hole, I want to ask you a bit of a personal question about this topic 'cause it's obvious this is a passion of yours, and our students and our faculty and staff benefit from it. Where did that passion come from for you? Was there a seminal moment that led you down this path?

Carrie Brown:

Sure. It's funny you say that. You always reflect and you're like, "How did I get here?" Some of my earliest recollections are, I remember when I was 10 years old, I wrote something, and I found this later as an adult and it said that I was going to cure AIDS and end racism. I was like, "Well, that's pretty ambitious. That's probably not going to happen." But I've always been somebody, I think, who's a very empathetic person and somebody who really, really cares about other human beings and wanting to, I know it sounds cliché, but wanting to help people. I feel like that's been deeply ingrained probably from my parents because they're pretty amazing people, and I think that they really ingrained in myself and my brother to care about other people. So I think it started there.

Then in seventh grade, I was voted to be a peer mentor in my middle school by my peers, so they all picked somebody that they thought they could trust and they could go talk to. So it's been a stepping stone to counseling. Instead of going to a counselor, you would meet with a peer mentor and try to work out whatever situation you were struggling with. I was like, "Wow, that was really pretty cool." I went to a fairly large high school, almost 400 students, and to think that you were chosen out of a small group of people to be someone that your peers felt like that they could trust or that they thought would be helpful to them.

So I think that's where it started early on and then certainly fostered through my college experiences. I went to Nassar University it is now, but when I went there, it was Nassar College in Rochester and majored in psych there. Really started out, I think initially thinking I wanted to go into academia, but then in grad school, really starting to see the connection you make with clients as a therapist. So my love of the work started as a therapist. Then over my transition through different roles here, really recognizing for me that while I still love therapy and I still see students in that capacity, even to this day, I was really excited about, is there an additional impact that I can have, and what does that look like, and how do I help mentor other people into having that passion as well?

John Boccacino:

I want to pivot on the podcast to the student piece of it. When it comes to what we offer here at the Barnes and what you and your staff will provide for our students, there's a lot of questions that students have as they're finding their way. It's a large campus that can be very intimidating. So what advice would you have starting off for students as they're trying to find that community here on campus?

Carrie Brown:

I agree with you. I think it can be, I know that the student body can be larger than some of our students' hometowns. It's coming to this realization that you're in this big place and there's so many people and there are so many opportunities, and I agree with you. I think sometimes it feels like there's so many items on the menu you don't know where to start. Makes me think about that big book like the Cheesecake Factory has, and you're like, "I don't know what I want. There's too much to choose from." I think it can feel that way sometimes for sure, especially when you're first coming to college. I think

something to think about is as hard as this is,

isn't successful because at the core of it, you have to really feel like it's important for you. If it doesn't really feel that way, it's hard to fake it, if that makes sense.

John Boccacino:

What are some other mistakes or things that you see students doing that you would probably tell them not to do when it comes to finding that community?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, I think sometimes it can be really hard to actually go places alone. So I think a lot of times if they don't have somebody to go to with something, they won't go. I think that that can end up being a mistake. While I understand the appeal of being like, "I at least feel like I need to know somebody," but I think that's where sometimes the beauty of some of our staff and our student staff, like our residence advisors, our different people who work on campus can perhaps be that bridge. They could be that person maybe that goes with you to that event. But I have heard that a lot of students will say, "Well, I don't even have anyone to go with, so I'm not going." I think that that can really be a missed opportunity. Believe me, I'm not saying that's easy. I understand the discomfort of walking into a room and not knowing anybody. I think that is a universal experience for a lot of people to go, "Ooh, I don't know anybody here. I'm not sure what to do."

But I think it's a great opportunity to meet new people, especially if it's an interest that you're really wanting to explore. I would hate for someone to miss an opportunity because they feel like they can't explore that by themselves. I would say the other thing sometimes is staying too connected to the people that aren't here, if that makes sense. While you need to foster, of course, your relationships that you have with your friends back home and family members, I think it can be easy to fall into, "I'm just going to be texting those people all the time or messaging them all the time, and I'm not going to be present here because maybe it is scary and it's big, and that's my comfort human nature to go to what's familiar." So I think that that can be a mistake too because then you're not really physically present, and you're missing maybe those opportunities to connect with the people who are actually here with you.

John Boccacino:

Is it normal for students to struggle with that confident level of trying to find friends and find that 'cause not the easiest thing in the world these days to go out there and make new friends?

Carrie Brown:

Absolutely. I think one of the things that we're seeing not just at Syracuse, but across the board when we look at our national data on college mental health is we're really seeing an uptick in social anxiety. One of the things that people are saying is their number one thing that they're worried about is how other people perceive them. So when we think of social anxiety, sometimes we think of people being very introverted, and certainly that can be a part of it, like a fear of public speaking or all these different things that might come to mind. But what was really interesting is what students were sharing is they were really more worried about how their peers perceive them.

I think social media plays a role into that. There's this expectation that everybody is living an extraordinary life and everybody is doing everything the right way and looks great all the time. I think that that distorts the reality that most of us are really underneath it all just wanting to connect and wanting to be happy. It's a challenge sometimes, I think, not to get in our own heads about overthinking, "Well, how did that person think about what I said? How did I sound in that moment?" That filter



Unfortunately, there is still a stigma around mental health and having to seek some sort of counseling. What would you say to someone who is maybe battling the, "Oh, boy, if I need counseling, something's wrong with me, I'm not strong enough. How do you break through the noise and break through the stigma to reassure them that this is a good step?"

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, I think one thing that we are seeing, which I think is tremendous, is we are seeing some of that stigma decrease, especially for our younger generation. I think there is a lot more awareness around mental health and a lot more awareness around universal struggles that we all have. So I think that that's been helpful to break down some of those barriers, but I do know that it still exists. I certainly think different cultures have different levels of stigma related to mental health, depending on what country you're from, what your cultural background is, what your familial culture is. Sometimes families might not be as supportive because as you mentioned, for some people it may look like you're not trying hard enough, you're not working hard enough, you're not doing the right things, and now you need someone else's help that shows somehow that you're not putting in enough effort.

What I would say to that is I think it's so interesting to look at mental health that way because we never think about this. If you broke your arm and you had to go to the emergency room, we wouldn't be like, "Oh, John, you didn't work hard enough to fix that broken bone. Why are you going to the emergency room?" So it's so fascinating to me that we can see physical health in that way, but we don't see mental health in that way. We don't look at it as part of the human experience as being, we are all emotional being. We might not necessarily all have the same types of struggles, but everyone in their life is going to experience something along the way that they probably would need support for. I think mental health therapy can look a lot of different ways.

Certainly, a lot of times when people see a therapist ongoing, there might be more underlying things going on or more things they need long-term support for, but sometimes people just need a one time that they stop in and they talk with somebody and they get a different perspective or they learn about resources that they didn't even know existed. They learn about holistic health and wellness and that maybe really what they're looking for is connectivity and they didn't know that this group existed on campus or they didn't know that exercise was helpful for mental health, and now they know that and they can try that. So coming to Barnes Center Counseling, it doesn't always mean that you're in need of, let's say, mental health treatment if you will. It means that you're looking at how do I get support around something that I find I've tried different things and it's just not changing?

So a lot of times we need that outside perspective. We need somebody who's not in the weeds with us to be able to give us a clearer picture and a clearer idea of how to work through what we're struggling with. It's rare for us to have people come to counseling because everything is going perfect. That usually doesn't happen. Usually something's happening in their life that they're struggling with and they probably have tried things, but they're not finding their answer. We might be people who either can provide that answer or help get them to that answer. So I think it's just important to know that there's a variety of reasons why people would come to counseling. We see every academic here close to 15% of the student body. So I think it's also important to know that people are coming and that they're finding it helpful and they're taking away that information of, "What can I do



the group counseling that's

Syracuse. How do you view things being differently under the mental wellness and the anxiety issues for international students?

Carrie Brown:

Yeah, I think you're right. I think when you come to a new place, like you said, it's always a challenge, but then think about everything is different. It's not just, "I'm now at a bigger college campus than my hometown." It's, "Now I am at a different country where maybe a different language is spoken, maybe the food is different, cultural expectations are different. How people socialize might be different." We are obviously all human beings, and under that there's universal similarities. There's actually six universal emotions and there's different things that we all have in common just as being humans, but there's also a lot of cultural differences depending on where you come from. So then just coming to this area, I think it's common to experience, I know people used to call it culture shock, just this ability of like, "Whoa, this is very different."

But I think what's really nice about Syracuse is we have such a robust size of international students that often there's communities that are formed among international students with each other in terms of there's the connectivity with international services. There's a lot of orientation processes, a lot of chances for international students to meet one another and really connect. In addition to coming to a new culture, there may be things happening at home that you feel very separated from because home could be very far away. I know over the years, I've worked with students where there might be war happening in their home country and they're here. There might be political uprisings happening in their home country and they're here. There could be a major illness outbreak happening and they're here and they can't get back home and they haven't been home in years or fill in the blank.

So that is a very different set of things to take into consideration for that population because most of our domestic students don't necessarily have those similar experiences. Because even if you're in California, you often can get on a plane ride and be home in several hours versus if you're your family's in China, it could take days or you might not be able to travel. But I think our university does a fantastic job of providing support to that community through, like I said, our international service office does a wonderful job. We have our folks here at Barnes really looking to connect with the international students. We did a focus listening group with international students last academic year as part of our diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility initiatives.

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Yeah, that's an awesome question. We're actually starting to talk about this as a leadership in Barnes Center of really looking at, again, Barnes Center is the health and wellness building. It is the hub, but it's not the only entity involved in health and wellness. It really needs to be a campus-wide initiative. So some of the things that we've been thinking about is down the road, how do we think about the residence halls and how do we create maybe those spaces to really enhance wellness within them? So for example, things like blackout curtains in the residence hall, so that having a dark room improves sleep quality, maybe better temperature control in the residence halls to improve sleep quality. We've started expanding our MindSpa. So downstairs on the first floor, we have a MindSpa and it has massage chairs and biofeedback and yoga instructions and art supplies. We now are going to be looking to have a MindSpa, I believe they have one over on the Mount.

I know they're looking at putting one in Bird Library, looking at putting one on South Campus, so how can we expand those things and have more satellite things on campus, meditation walking paths on campus, just really looking at different things. Like if you asked me pie in the sky dream, I think it would be wonderful for us to be able to have... I know a lot of universities are doing things like napping pods or places where people can go so they can relax if they feel like they need a break, really working with our faculty and staff to think about maybe altering the time that assignments are due. So instead of