Mental Health and Addiction

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**SPEAKERS**

Alexandra Kriofske Mainella, Weneaka Jones, Benjamin Linzy, John Mantsch

**Benjamin Linzy** 00:00

You're listening to Marquette University's COVID Convos podcast. In each episode, representatives from Marquette's STEM and humanities communities will bring you insights into the pandemic that you may be missing. Marquette University is located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the traditional lands of Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk, and Menominee peoples along the Southwest shores of Michigame, North America's largest system of freshwater lakes, where the Milwaukee, Menominee, and Kinnikinic Rivers meet and the people of Wisconsin’s sovereign Anishinaabe, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Oneida and Mohican nations remain present.

**Weneaka Jones** 00:37

I want to welcome everyone to our podcast today that’s really exploring the larger impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our individual and collective mental health and we will spend some time today really focusing in on the effects of the pandemic and other contextual factors specifically as they relate to those in our community that are struggling with substance use disorders. And so, we will get things started with an introduction and I should probably first start by introducing myself. My name is Weneaka Jones. I am a second-year clinical assistant professor in the College of Education. I'm in the Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology. I teach theories of counseling psychopathology and diagnosis, assessment ethics and internship course. My professional background is in mental health counseling. I'm actually a graduate of the department's master's program in mental health counseling, and I have a PhD in rehabilitation counselor education and professional background around employment for folks with disabilities. My research mainly centered around promoting employment and financial self-sufficiency among youth of color with disability and also improving high school transition for young adults living with sickle cell disease. Just a little bit about me personally in terms of my connections to move to Milwaukee, my mom was raised in Milwaukee. I was born in West Allis, but grew up in northeastern Wisconsin in the Green Bay Area, and then moved back to Milwaukee for college in 2004. I'm always just proud to share this generally that my family we're a first responder family. So my husband works for the fire service for the City of Milwaukee. So those are kind of big connections to Milwaukee. Allie? John? Who would like go next?

**Alexandra Kriofske Mainella** 02:48

I’ll start. My name is Allie Kriofske Mainella and like Weneaka, I'm also a second-year clinical assistant professor in the Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology program. I am a Milwaukee native. I grew interest in the disability and counseling fields as well as substance abuse and substance use disorders. I have a long family history with substance use and have been working with people with disabilities, mental health, substance use and other disabilities and the Milwaukee community for really my whole career. I teach some courses that are introduction to counselor programs, and I also teach some of our rehabilitation counseling classes that focus on counseling people with disabilities. And I'm very excited to be here. Thanks.

**John Mantsch** 03:37

Great. Thanks. Thanks, Alie. Thanks, Weneaka. It's really exciting for me to be here. I'm not a I'm not a clinician or counselor, but I'm excited to hear the perspective from Alie and Weneaka as they're really working on the front line with many of these issues. My name is John Mantsch. I'm a professor and chair of Biomedical Sciences at Marquette University have been at Marquette for close to 20 years. I'm a researcher. So I have an active research program that investigates the neurobiological basis of addictive disease and other related stress related disorders. Prior to coming to Marquette, I was a postdoc at the Rockefeller University in New York City where I worked in the laboratory in the biology of addictive diseases with one of the members of the medical team that actually discovered methadone maintenance therapies. So for my, for my research background, it's always been focused on addiction. I teach pharmacology, I work with grad students, and recently I've become heavily involved in health equity initiatives. And I'm really excited to see the intersection between what I do as a neuroscientist and health equity as it relates to COVID and some of the adjacent challenges that we're facing. So I guess I'll stop there and let we need you know, talk a little bit about the Unique context we're in right now as a society and how it's really, really affected mental health.

**Weneaka Jones** 05:06

Thanks, John. Thanks. I learned a lot about you that I didn't know. Very nice. Yeah. So I think that in order to, you know, really do this conversation, the justice that it deserves, we kind of have to paint a picture for the context that we're currently in. And specifically, what unique combination of contextual factors are creating these stressors that are negatively impacting individual and collective mental health in our communities. Thinking about this, one of the first things that came to mind for me, being someone who's deeply interested in employment and the importance of work for folks. You know, I immediately thought first about the economic impact. So when we think about what it means for folks, when, in March, we had an unemployment rate that was around 4%. And then, literally, leaping forward to April, it jumped up to 14%. And I think as of last month, it's around 10%. So it's really kind of taking those numbers and kind of really thinking about what that means for folks in our community and sort of the very unique way that COVID has impacted us economically, that folks are just not able to work in ways that they were able to work with work before. And so sort of the way that states made decisions around who's considered an essential worker and some of the immediate effects of that and then those longer term economic effects that we're going to see later, something that really caught my attention specifically related to people with disabilities is that I believe it was just last month, that unemployment benefits were approved for people with disabilities in Wisconsin that were receiving social security disability benefits. We're really seeing just our legislative bodies facing a lot of challenges around how to provide financial relief nationally. So economic impact, creating a very unique contextual factor, and a unique set of stressors. So next, Alie and John, please, you know, feel free to jump in as I'm sort of rolling through these, these factors that come to mind for me, but if there are any others for you that come to mind, please, you know, hop on, hop on in. But next I was thinking you know about health. We're still in a situation where cases are going up. We're seeing hotspots. Also this really interesting phenomenon that's occurring with like this post COVID like this post-COVID syndrome where folks are taking months to fully recover from COVID. And we're not talking about individuals that had preexisting conditions we're talking about, I think the statistic was around like one in five young adults with no chronic health conditions. Prior to COVID, we're taking several months to recover from coded. So, you know, if that's the case for individuals with no prior chronic health conditions, we can kind of really get a sense of what the challenge is around recovery for folks that are experiencing substance use disorders, other chronic health conditions, disability. So that's what comes to mind in terms of sort of the contextual factors around health. And then kind of thinking about just sort of how we are creatures of habit as human beings and so the abrupt change, just change to our day to day life was another really interesting contextual factor I think that, understandably, has created a lot of stress for individuals. So thinking about, you know, disruptions to work, changes to work and some of those relationships that we have that we sort of take for granted, right being able to connect with other folks, colleagues to see them daily and, you know, soccer practice and other things that we're just sort of used to doing in our day to day life, how that we didn't have an opportunity to prepare for that change. It was an abrupt change. And so with that, experiencing loss, so a loss in terms of our way of life for some folks having lost loved ones to COVID-19 or to have lost loved ones, and not had an opportunity to, to mourn them or to like, have an opportunity to in a ceremonious way to say goodbye to them so I can speak to that personally. My aunt passed. She lived out of state. We still don't know the conditions around her passing. And we had to put together a virtual memorial service. And that was just, it just really, I think, impacted our ability to really kind of process the loss. So also sort of around this topic of abrupt change, uncertainty about the future. What can I expect a month from now, two months from now, when we think about folks who are struggling with substance use disorders in our community, there is a sense of kind of living for some folks and in a transient manner. There's kind of a sense of not knowing what to expect that kind of, what's the word I'm looking for, loss of stability, or a lack of predictability and stability and life. But we see that collectively, that we are extremely same concerns around the uncertainty about our future, and then also like the future of our country. And so I think that's a really nice segue into this contextual factor that I had a hard time trying to decide if it sort of, you know, if it's occurring like side by side with the pandemic or if it's sort of overarching the pandemic, but the current racial justice movement, or unrest, I'm not sure you know, different folks call it different things. But the racial justice focus that we have right now in our nation with protesting and with folks engaged in a lot of self-reflection and also, we see different folks started going through different stages of grief and, and coping. I think as a country where we are questioning our identity in some folks, we're trying to hold on to remnants of our identity. So we're very much in a state of transition as a result of the racial justice movement. All this change, this unwanted abrupt change, has understandably led to a lot of multi-layer stressors that are affecting us, as a nation as a community in different ways.

**Alexandra Kriofske Mainella** 12:25

I love what you're saying, Weneaka, about the side by side feeling, whether it's all together or as a side by side, the racial justice movement next to a pandemic where people are really unsure. And I hear people all the time including our students weighing every decision. Every decision is a huge risk and a huge decision that has to be weighed. Though, like you said, our students are having sort of an existential crisis about wanting to come back to campus and see each other in person. Then there are students who are fighting in the racial justice movement who are feeling this sense of grief and loss. Alongside, you know, our campus, which is a largely white campus where, as you said, there's I think our white students are struggling with maybe opening their eyes for the first time to some racial injustice are trying to figure out what role they can play. When you think about, you know, we talk about substance use, and we talk about disability and some of those intersecting identities, whether that's just our community or our students have, and they have to weigh all these choices. So I've had done some work helping just helping people who need wheelchairs get to protests. Like you said, the pandemic has really isolated us, and it has created a space where people are desperate to see their parents and we have students who are living with parents who are worried about coming back to school and bringing back COVID to their older aging parents, students, you know. And so it's really interesting and like you said, the online move was so sudden. So many of our students find this punch so less accessible not to be in front of people to feel their energy, to be able to sort of see the people that they want to talk to. Our students with learning disabilities are struggling to catch up to all the discussion posts that take place, have natural conversations in the classroom. And then we have other students who have autism spectrum disorder who are finding this this move wonderful, because it's so much easier to interface on the screen and using discussion platforms to interact with people than to be face to face and have all the pressure so it's really interesting how it’s impacting people with disabilities in different ways. And then of course, like you said that those individuals that have substance use disorders, I know so many people who felt they had some addiction under control and in the quick switch to being isolated to being at home to feeling The existential crisis are turning back to some of those addictions because they just don't know what else to do or don't have access to the supports they had before. And I'm sure I mean, I imagine, John, that some of what you're hearing about the different issues in Milwaukee with addiction.

**John Mantsch** 15:16

Great. Absolutely. I think that's true. Yes. A couple observations before I talk specifically about substance use disorder. You know, it strikes me that certainly, you know, some of the things we're facing aren’t new things. You know, we're dealing with communities that have been historically under duress. I mean, we were talking about community trauma for a long time before, you know, COVID the pandemic set in and what the pandemic has done is really served as an amplifier for some of these disparities and inequities that are within the community, all of these issues. And then on top of that, you know, I think even when you talk about the racial injustice issues, I mean, those were those were there as well. And I can't help but think that, you know, the onset of COVID probably just really made these more kind of urgent issues within our Black communities and diverse communities. So I totally agree with you that a lot of this is in parallel, but it's been it's an amplifier. These aren't new problems, it just worsened with the onset of COVID. And I think the longterm effects of COVID and all these adjacent things, they're going to be pretty pretty long standing. In terms of the opioid crisis and substance use disorder. Yeah, the numbers are pretty scary. I mean, early indications are that overdoses are up, you know, some people will say it's only you know, 20 to 25%. Others will say it's much greater than that. The frustrating thing is the demographics for the opioid crisis, the demographics for some of the social unrest, the demographics for the socioeconomic issues and the demographics for COVID all align pretty closely. And that's a scary thing, because I think this is what leads to some of that amplification. What's causing this resurgence and substance use disorder, you know, not clear, it's complex. It's probably multifactorial. Certainly social isolation and loneliness are known to be things that can can worsen of substance use disorder and increase the risk for relapse. On the flip side, social enrichment is known to be a protective factor against opioid use. And so social distancing is probably part of it. And there's a whole area of neuroscience research that that shows that isolation and loneliness and stress influence the hard circuits in your brain that are, you know, contributing to relapse and drug craving. And in substance use disorder is a real is a hard science behind all of this. You know, one of the things I'm a little concerned about is it's known that the influence of stress on the brain is particularly problematic during developmental windows. So to the extent that we're concerned right now in adult populations, substance use disorder, I think that you know, for adolescent populations of developing brains that are particularly susceptible to stress and require socialization and interaction, I'm a little concerned that not just substance use disorder, but a lot of the mental health consequences of social distancing and isolation and stay at home right now are going to be manifest later on in some of these in some of these young people. So I think there's some real concerns there. And certainly, this isn't just substance use disorder, you know, you have other comorbid conditions, depression and other stress-related conditions that are also linked to isolation and loneliness. And this is all happening at a time when access as as you said, early access to support, education, health care, it's all really limited. And you know the the the other factors that come along with the pandemic homelessness, joblessness, domestic violence, all of these things are again feeding in. It is a concern that this broad inequity disparity gap that we already saw before COVID is just widening, as this happens. It's not really clear what the solution is going to be. I'll stop here and let you as the as the clinicians on the call, maybe you can think about some ways that we can, we can, you know, come together and hopefully, you know, just mitigate some of these things because I think it's a real concern and people are just focusing on the, the pandemic itself, but the adjacent issues, I think, are going to have long term impact in terms of community health and you know, societal burden.

**Weneaka Jones** 19:53

Yeah, John, I appreciate the way that you laid that out, and you know, one thing I thought about was, you know, particularly for young, Black adolescents and you thinking about some of the stressors that some of those young people have been experiencing, like right here in Milwaukee, in some neighborhoods and some of our community, so thinking about the long term impact of exposure to that stress and trauma. And then on top of that, that we are currently seeing Black people being killed by police brutalized that we're not talking about the things that have happened 50 years ago, 100 years ago. These things are happening currently. So I think about the impact of that on our Black youth, you know, who are seeing these things play out, and are really looking to us as adults, as professionals to try to come up with solutions. They're watching the way that we respond and I get the sense that the Black community, that we are really in a fight for survival, you know, between our elders getting sick and dying from COVID-19, the police brutality and killings. It's, it's overwhelming, you know, when we layer that with the economic impacts, as well. So I appreciate you helping to even, you know, to broaden the context. And then also the way that you layered in some important elements related to the science behind substance use disorders and addictions and things like that. So, so thanks for that.

**Alexandra Kriofske Mainella** 21:43

And I appreciate what you're saying, Weneaka, and I think the other day I was talking to parents or thinking about sending their kids back to Marquette. When you think about the way the Black community has been impacted through the course of our country's history, and then the way that we're seeing things now the sort of awakening of many white people who are like, okay, something needs to be done. And I think one of the things that's really important that we do in our program is we are working hard to train counselors to go out into the community, to provide mental health services, but also to do that with their eyes open to their own privilege, their own part in systemic racism and teaching our students for example, that we have to be able to look at the part we play in the systemic racism, the kind of racism that is what we see as a cycle of not getting access to resources, not getting the same jobs, getting turned away for job interviews, which then of course, contributes to the isolation and the lack of employment and the reduced self-esteem and the mental health issues and the substance abuse. That is like you said, John, was already there. It was already a problem that this pandemic is laying bare for us to see. And so I hope you feel some of the sense of hope I feel when I look at our students and see that they're at least opening their eyes to some things. And I hope we can train them to walk out of our program, at least, to think about those things when they go out and serve people.

**John Mantsch** 23:22

So on the topic of structural issues, structural challenges, and kind of related to desparities, I'm curious, because, you know, as we kind of navigate these issues, we become really reliant on things like telehealth and, you know, educational programs delivered remotely. It seems that, from what I'm hearing and seeing is that the disparities that we're talking about extend to the technology world. There's clearly a digital divide that is there. And when we talk about how these issues are getting amplified, I mean, it's like the causes are disproportionately impacting communities and then the solutions, access through, you know, whether it's Wi Fi or or having, you know, a computer or your other, other, you know, services that can allow people to engage resources in the community, it seems like those are limited because the digital divide is real communities that are under socio economic duress also have less less access to resources that can be used to help address the problems they're facing. And to me, that's a worry. And I'm curious, as both of you are in counseling and focused on, you know, working with, with populations that are facing challenges, what are you seeing in that regard? Do you feel like we have adequate ways to reach out and address communities that are currently facing these terrible, you know, challenges that have been amplified by COVID?

**Weneaka Jones** 24:54

Many folks in our community do not have the resources or the ability to access digitally offered modalities of treatment or services. There's more than I want to say just generally around that. It's frustrating to see the lack of the ability to access many, many types of services, how limited that is and how systemic and it's across systems. When will we really collectively decide that we really need to do something about that, that we really need to change the way that these systems are organized, that we were thinking more universally about access? Yes, John, we are definitely seeing some barriers there and I guess I'm hopeful that we will start really encouraging our students to really think about policy and to think about their ability to impact policy to be involved legislatively, because it's only at that level, that we're able to make those types of changes systemically, that then therefore impact infrastructure in the way that resources are made available. I guess some of what you said, John, that this pandemic has really just laid bare, sort of this other America right? You know? I think of that song by Childish Gambino? And it's, this is America, right? There are, I don't remember who said that. But someone else said that recently. They're this very rich, affluent, resource rich, America and there's also this other place where folks are have been in poverty for generations have been underserved for generations have had little access for generations. And it was by design, and it is institutional. I just got chills, you know, you know that it's hard to think that folks have intentionally put systems and processes in place to lessen the likelihood that all will have an opportunity to live out the American dream.

**Alexandra Kriofske Mainella** 27:32

Yes, Weneaka. And I, one of the things I've been thinking a lot about as we head into fall is just really impressing what you're saying and our students that this America, the systems in place were purposefully created. I know it's sort of a hokey way to think about it, but I mean, when I teach my students who are going to be doing couples counseling, one of the most important things and a healthy couple is shared power. And that is what we're missing in our country, and that's what we're missing in so many of the issues of systemic racism and the, you know, technological gap. And all of the issues that that we're seeing is that they're needs, there has to be shared power, and there is not at this moment shared power. And I hope that as people see this more and more, that they realize that there isn't shared power, that people will be willing to share the little power that they have, even those people who have great privilege, but maybe not a ton of wealth. And again, I tend to be a little too idealistic. And I know we're going to see this change slowly, but impressing upon the students that see us here and the community that we share as a Marquette University, the systems in place and really paying attention and opening our eyes to the places where we don't see shared power and realize that there has to be shared power and that really we’d all benefit. That if you get everyone to the table if you have all the voices present making policies that elected officials in office, this is going to benefit all of us in ways that are so much richer than what we have them seeing.

**John Mantsch** 29:17

Alie, I share your hope. Like, you know, they're the real challenge that you know Marquette and other institutions like it need to need to address. They need to step up to it. I mean, we can, we can talk to our you know, predominantly suburban, you know, white student population about awareness and try to empower, but really the solutions, I think, are going to require greater access for communities and Black students within the Milwaukee community to Marquette. And a pathway that allows students to come into programs like yours at Marquette, continue to partner in meaningful and productive ways, with communities in Milwaukee. And that hasn't always been the case with institutions. And then there has to be, I think, a path that leads students back into the communities from whence they came so that they can be powerful advocates and partners to address some of these challenges. And you know, although Marquette recently has taken some steps in that direction, we have a long way to go. And I'm hoping that you know, and I don't know if this is going to make it into the, into the podcast, but I do think that hopefully, if our students take anything away from it, it's that it's not that they are going to be themselves the solutions to the issue, but they're going to have to find ways to improve access, to kind of break down some of these structural issues that have exaggerated the inequities and disparities that are out there and give more opportunity and empowerment to students and community members to be able to exert change and I'm hoping that Marquette finds a way to do that. It's, I think, it starts with access and affordability of education. But it also meaningful and productive partnerships in the community, not just solutions coming from Marquette. But solutions that are being, you know, collaboratively designed with community leaders. And that's my perspective.

**Alexandra Kriofske Mainella** 31:18

You are right. And it's my place of white privilege to be saying, be able to have that feeling of “Oh, I hope, I hope,” and a lot of this does require us to get uncomfortable to challenge the systems that we're working within, that we're living within, and to be willing to cede power, to cede resources that others may have those pieces of the place that we share.

**Weneaka Jones**

Agreed.

**John Mantsch** 31:47

Since this is going out to students, what can we tell our students that they can do, aside from just being more aware of the history that has has led to this point? I don't know. I mean, that's a hard question. But I think that's hopefully the students listening to this, you know, will maybe gain some sense of direction from it. So what are your thoughts? I mean, what, what can we do?

**Weneaka Jones** 32:15

Well, I think it's hard conversations like this, right, where we're pulling together folks with different experiences, different backgrounds, whether that be culturally, personally, professionally. I think it starts there, you know, having open and honest conversations and I love this podcast modality is an opportunity then for folks of all different walks of life or students from all different backgrounds to then hear conversations that other groups of folks are having around pertinent issues. And so I think it starts there just by talking, you know, just being truthful about what's actually happening. You know what's really going on and being willing to, to hear other perspectives? And think about? I know for me, and I've thought a lot about it, does our program do enough to really get students to think about, you know, how do I, how do I, how do I benefit from my privilege? And we, you know, we don't only have white students in our, in our counseling master's program. We have students who have different religious backgrounds, racial/ethnic backgrounds, different backgrounds, you know, but just, we all have you asked all students to consider, in what ways have you been oppressed and have in what ways have you experienced and benefited from privilege? So I think, not to toot our own horn in terms of that, I think, you know, our program, we're always striving to encourage students to have Those types of conversations to consider the multi-layered context that's occurring in every course whether we're talking about theories of counseling, whether we're talking about assessment, we're always thinking about the historical context, the current context. And now, we'll be talking about the pan—the COVID-19 pandemic context, the racial justice movement context. You know, we're always talking about challenging students to think about course content and ideas within the larger context, as well. So I think it starts here. I think we're making change just by being here today. Yeah, on this podcast.

**John Mantsch** 34:46

I know for me and my colleagues, we're all kind of we're biomedical people. So we're a couple degrees separated from challenges that are being faced in the community and I think, from my personal perspective and for our students and, you know, having people like, like the two of you, you know, guiding how we educate our students, you know, maybe interacting with students more and I know, that's a big challenge. I mean, our, our program that we have 750 students, but, you know, at the same time, I think it's important that that students aren't just getting this, this kind of 10,000-foot view of the problem that they often do. You know, a lot of times in courses there's lip service paid to inequity and you know, racial injustice. And you know, it's it's done in almost a theoretical way without actually bringing in not just people from within the university but community members and I think if Marquette wants to have a real community, you know, partnership, that partnership should should also be evident in the classroom, where students are learning from people who are living that reality or facing that reality either as individuals who support are challenged by the duress that urban Milwaukee is facing. And, and we're hoping to do that more. I hope other programs are as well. But it's not an easy thing to, you know, integrate into a curriculum.

**Weneaka Jones** 36:15

I think another thing I thought of, too, you know, talked about really making..... we want students to be aware of their power. And I think a lot of times we direct that more towards white students, but I think there's there's something really special and needed and important around creating like support groups or safe places for for students of color, not just on our campus but I think just tend to community you know, whether it be in public school practice, generally, a supportive place and a coming together to share experiences provide encouragement, we use a support group model for young adults with with sickle cell disease, late spring into the summer as a part of sort of interdisciplinary research study that we were working on between the College of Ed and the College of Nursing and the feedback that we've received from the participants, particularly as you know, COVID happened, you know, that the participants were able to support each other, through this groups and through these groups and what all we did as researchers and academics was just pull together a place, you know, just set it up, just set up a virtual place, you know, for these young adults to just kind of come together, share resources, share ideas, share how they're feeling. So I think that's important, too. I think there needs to be a renewed focus on healing communities of color, as well. I think that's, I think that's important. I'm not quite sure what that looks like. I mean, certainly counseling and access to mental health services. But I also think there needs to be some like, inside the culture, discussions around what nurtures me, what heals me, what heals us collectively? What are we needing to do within ourselves sort of in the in group? Also, what conversations do grandmamas need to have with grandbabies? What does that need to look like within the culture? Certainly interventions and services and treatments, you know, it's nice that those things are available, too. But I think then I can speak to a Black culture because I'm Black. So I think there are conversations that need to be had within the culture around what are our priorities for healing, what what resources do we need for healing? What heals us, what strengthens us, as well? So I think that's sort of another part I'm sure there are like, there's a whole plethora of research ideas and opportunities in that idea as well. So, so students who are listening, yeah. Because I think that's something that's needed, too. I think a lot of times as clinicians, we want to provide interventions and we want to come into communities and try to fix and heal. Sometimes I think it's better to encourage and empower communities to heal themselves. Figure out what that looks like.

**Alie Kriofske Manella**

Yeah.

**John Mantsch** 39:35

Sorry, what an awesome point to end on. I mean, I think, you know, I think it really speaks to what should be guiding universities or center faculty and that is, you know, working with partners within the communities to identify solutions and create solutions within the communities and sometimes we lose sight of that goal. Thanks for that. That's, that's a powerful, powerful statement.

**Alie Kriofske Manella**

Yes.

**Benjamin Linzy** 40:06

Thank you for listening to this episode of COVID Convos. You can learn more about this podcast and research being done at Marquette University by visiting the Research and Innovation website at marquette.edu You can reach the podcast via email at covidconvos@marquette.edu Music for this episode is "Phase 2" by Xylo Ziko.