

[00:00:00.06] TORAL PATEL: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees. Families-- we all have them, whether they're chosen or biological. On today's show, we explore the complex issues that working families and caregivers are experiencing during a global pandemic. Michelle Artibee, director of Workforce Wellbeing, joins us for this amazing, rich, and intimate conversation. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:32.46] ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:34.08] TORAL PATEL: And you're listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:00:36.59] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:59.48] ANTHONY SIS: Michelle, thank you so much for joining us on the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. Why don't we start by having you introduce yourself to our listeners, sharing your name, your title, where you work here at Cornell as well as the pronouns that you use?

[00:01:14.99] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Hi, Anthony. Hi, Toral. Thank you for having me today. My name is Michelle Artibee. I'm the director of Workforce Wellbeing in Human Resources at Cornell. And the pronouns that I use are she, her, hers. So employee well-being at Cornell is really an umbrella term for three different departments that help employees, and that includes Work/Life and Human Resources, Cornell Wellness, and the Faculty and Staff Assistance Program.

[00:01:39.11] All three are staffed by excellent, caring folks who support the physical health, mental health, and family life matters of employees. And my role really is to connect to the three and to work with our other campus partners that also support employee well-being for a well-rounded approach.

[00:01:54.32] ANTHONY SIS: Awesome. Thank you so much for the work that you do. And I'm excited to talk about this topic, because it is so important and then well-being in general. Toral, you have our question of the day today. So what is our question of the day going to be?

[00:02:08.31] TORAL PATEL: So I do have our question of the day. And in nature of what we're going to be talking about, the question is, what is one change or something that you've implemented in your life that has had the biggest impact on your well-being?

[00:02:22.28] ANTHONY SIS: That's a really good question.

[00:02:24.02] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Well, I have an answer. May I chime in?

[00:02:26.30] [LAUGHTER]

[00:02:27.17] ANTHONY SIS: Please.

[00:02:27.60] TORAL PATEL: Yes.

[00:02:28.37] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: All right. So specifically about my well-being and the start of the pandemic, I had an office setup that was in my living room for the first five months. And even though it was an office setup, it was in the living room. Right? And as time passed, I just really realized how sick I was of seeing the same walls, daytime and nighttime.

[00:02:54.60] And it was really creating challenges for me and creating my own work/life boundaries and enjoying being in my home. So I really invested in changing up my house, creating an office space that is separate from my living room. And I moved into it a couple of weeks ago now.

[00:03:10.61] And it has been a life changer for me in this remote environment. And it's really not just helped me physically. It's helped me mentally. It's helped my focus. It's been fantastic. So I don't know why it took me so long. I guess probably the work and the logistics involved with it, but it was well worth it.

[00:03:28.50] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for sharing. That's similar for me, too. But actually, the one that I immediately thought of is recently, so just being vulnerable here for myself and sharing that I had a particular moment where I emotionally was very down.

[00:03:43.07] And it wasn't depression, necessarily. I think it was just an intense moment of sadness and just thinking about a number of different things. And so one of the things that I have always done throughout the course of my life is journal. And I've always found journaling to be a very spiritual thing for me, very healing in many ways. And I typically will only engage in that activity when I have those intense moments of sadness.

[00:04:04.37] And so I actually engaged with it recently and realized that I hadn't written in it for about 9 or 10 months. But this journal, interestingly enough, I've had for many years. And I only write in it when I feel the need to. So I know some people do it as a daily practice. For myself, I don't feel the need to do it on a daily basis. However, I have found that when I do need it, it is very comforting. It's very healing. It's very spiritual.

[00:04:29.54] And in doing that recently for me, it's allowed me to now have more space, to focus on other things that are more positive, and to also be more productive in terms of my work. So that's always been something I do, but just recently engaged with again.

[00:04:44.06] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: I think that's beautiful.

[00:04:46.25] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I agree. And for me, like the two of you, I have also created an individual space where I do my work. And that has been helpful. But I guess the one thing that's had the biggest impact on my personal well-being has been mindfulness.

[00:05:00.44] And I'll be honest and say that when I first heard about it and even when I first tried to practice it, I was a skeptic. I didn't believe in it. And then one day, I tried it again. More recently within the last six months, I tried it again. And it really helped me. And the concept that I understood more than the word mindfulness was the concept of being in the moment. That's what resonated with me.

[00:05:24.32] And so now, I try to imply that in almost everything that I do. So wherever I am, whether I am working, whether I'm with my family or my children, whatever I'm doing, I'm in that moment. Then I'm not focused on everything else. And that has really helped to reduce the stress. So I think, for me, it's that being-in-that-moment philosophy. I've been able to employ that in various aspects of my life.

[00:05:45.86] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Isn't it remarkable how much we're learning about ourselves throughout this entire process? And I love the journaling. Because I was thinking the other day, just how many things I've learned about myself, and a lot about my organization, about my team, about my colleagues over the past six months, and some really, very powerful learnings throughout that process as well. And it occurred to me, gosh, I'm not documenting that in any way. And while some of that will stick with me, I want to be able to come back to that.

[00:06:14.53] So I love what you shared about journaling, Anthony. And I think that that's something that I'm going to try to get into the habit of as well. If only for the sake of posterity, to be able to reflect back on this period of time, can help us with the emotions we're going through right now. But what a great way to go back to this time, and look at what you've been through, and how you processed it all, and to really be able to learn from that. It's pretty remarkable.

[00:06:38.00] ANTHONY SIS: This is actually a really nice question. Thank you, Toral, for that question. It was really nice.

[00:06:41.97] TORAL PATEL: No problem. Yeah, I thought it was a great transition to what we're going to be talking about today.

[00:06:46.80] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. And I think it's a great topic. Because for me, I'll speak for myself in that as somebody who's single, doesn't have family here in Ithaca where I'm currently based, I read a lot of articles. I read a lot from an external perspective of what some of the challenges that families are facing right now with this pandemic as well as with all these injustices that are occurring here in this country and around the world.

[00:07:10.72] But with both of you as people who have families, I recognize that your experiences are very different than mine. And, Michelle, with the work that you do, too, you have a really unique perspective to understanding what other people at Cornell who also have families are going through. And so I think to help start this conversation, what are some of the general things and topics that you've seen that are affecting working families at the moment? And we'll just start it from there.

[00:07:39.60] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Sure, sounds good. So COVID-19 has really spotlighted family life issues in a lot of different ways in local communities in the United States and globally, so seeing lots of different things come up. And I think in the United States, what we're seeing is just how high of a dependence families have on public schools as an activity that their child goes to so that the parent can go to work, especially for our parents who are in service industry types of positions.

[00:08:08.79] But then we're also seeing the dependence that they have on public schools for their food programs, for their reliance on internet access and those types of things. So when the school system is not available in its traditional form, that disrupts family life in a really significant way.

[00:08:25.59] In the United States, with the exception of Head Start and universal pre-school, child care is largely unfunded. Parents shoulder a very high cost of care. And employers like Cornell-- we subsidize or offer child care benefits to families. But the costs are still very high, particularly for multi-child households making that pretty difficult.

[00:08:46.24] And then you add on the complexity for the child care centers and family providers themselves when they have to close for a short period of time or a long period of time. They are at very high risk for long-term closure, because of the financial resources that are needed to reactivate.

[00:09:03.25] So the care providers themselves are having challenges with both the financial end and with the care issues that they have themselves. Right? Many care providers have school-age children that are impacted by public school issues. And these health protocols that child care programs and schools need to integrate really create a lot of challenges for just the affordability and the logistics.

[00:09:26.13] So speaking a little bit more specifically about Cornell University and our workforce, what we're seeing is we have single-parent families. We have grandparents raising grandchildren. We have employees who are needed on campus in very critical roles right now for the campus reactivation who are experiencing child care challenges. And that's a reality that they are facing.

[00:09:52.23] I think that a fair number of our families also have children with disabilities. And the disruption that they've experienced as a result of all of this has impacted the therapeutic services that they receive, the educational accommodations, all of those

things. So while families are grappling with all this, they're also trying to give their absolute best in their role as Cornell-- either faculty members, academics, staff.

[00:10:18.52] And that is a lot to have to navigate all at the same time, whether that be in a remote environment or an in-person environment at the university. So we're just really seeing that play out in terms of those burdens. And a fair number of them also have elder care, or disabled spouses, or partners, other types of care-giving challenges that only make these issues more complex.

[00:10:40.35] ANTHONY SIS: That's a lot.

[00:10:40.86] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: It is a lot. It's very overwhelming. And that's just the two-minute snippet, right? I mean, there are a lot of different intricacies that go into this. You add on the layer of the health issues, and you think about a parent. Parents' entire job is to protect a child, protect their children, and then to prepare them for independence that get them through life. Right?

[00:11:03.32] So you take something like a pandemic and a parent's innate desire to keep their family safe in any way that they can. And we think about a pandemic. And what does it mean to reactivate services and programs? To me, it's also looking at reintegrating into schools, and child care, and our family life in the more traditional sense.

[00:11:26.33] And families are at different places in terms of the amount of risk that they're willing to take right now as it relates to that. Or they have a very different definition of what health and safety looks like for them. And I think that that just makes all these other logistical matters that much more complex when you add in the emotions of it all.

[00:11:44.37] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, definitely I agree, wholeheartedly, with that, Michelle. And the pandemic is just one of the issues that our families are facing right now. And so, how do you think the other issues that are really impacting our society in terms of social justice issues, the economic downturn issues-- how are they impacting families?

[00:12:02.84] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: In so many different ways. I mean, our colleagues of color who are navigating just so many-- a complex array of emotions due to the deeply racist and horrific events that have happened-- they're worried about the children that they're raising, worried about raising children in today's society. They're worried about their family members.

[00:12:22.64] Cornell-- many of our faculty and staff that live here do not have family nearby. They may have family in other cities and other areas of the United States. And we have a lot of what we call transplant individuals here, right? And so I think the disconnection from their family and friends only heightens the worry.

[00:12:40.22] And in some ways, we are seeing in the data that there's a disproportionate impact that COVID is having on communities of color and those in different socioeconomic ranges. Right? So that just adds a layer of complexity. And then we have, certainly, our white colleagues who are in biracial relationships, have children of color, having very mixed feelings about whether they belong in the diversity and inclusion space in terms of conversation and just their own complex feelings about it all.

[00:13:13.82] I think, ultimately, family life is deeply personal and very sensitive. And I'm thinking about our families right now, our diverse families that, for whatever reason, are unable to carry a child. And they're going through a multi-year process related to foster care and adoption. Or they're suffering miscarriages. So all of these things occurring in the overlay of the racist events that we've seen in a pandemic only make them that much more emotional and complicated for families to have to navigate.

[00:13:46.07] ANTHONY SIS: So one of the things I just thought about as you were sharing all of these things is how-- for me, personally, I know our work, and I'm sure your work as well, has increased tremendously, right? The need for the services that both of our offices provide here at Cornell has increased and rightfully so, right? There are people that are needing more training, more education as well as just some more support.

[00:14:08.63] But how do we navigate that while still meeting at capacity what our normal work expectations were? Right? So I think a lot about just how me, as somebody who's single, is navigating some of those challenges around meeting expectations and priorities that are happening at the same time. So for working families, are there similar issues? I assume that there are. But I think with your insight, what has that been like for working families here at Cornell?

[00:14:35.99] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: We're hearing from working families that-- so many different experiences. And we've heard from some. And this is when I say we heard from some, what I really mean by that is we conducted a survey this summer of working families. And that provided us with a lot of feedback about their experiences. And that was parents and elder caregivers.

[00:14:54.59] But then there's the anecdotal interactions that we have with individuals and the trainings that we do. So I always think it's important to set context for, well, we're hearing this. Right? You need to understand where that data and that information is coming from. So we've interacted with a lot of families who are deeply appreciative of the ways in which the university has supported them and more importantly, how their manager has supported them throughout this process.

[00:15:18.36] Others are a little bit more reluctant to talk to their leaders, their managers about their needs during this time. There's a lot of layers to that. Right? There's the concern that they will be seen as not as committed to their work right now in an environment where it's all hands on deck.

[00:15:36.29] Everyone is working very hard. Everyone wants to appear as though their role is absolutely essential right now. Because economically, we have concerns about the financial realities that we're facing as an organization. And so as a working parent to come forward and say, I don't know that I can handle this amount of workload or I need help in working through this, many are very reluctant to do that or reluctant to take time away from work for fear that, as well, they will be perceived as not being as committed.

[00:16:07.75] So one of the things that we've been really trying to do is get out there and to work with both parents and with managers to say, OK, how do we meet the organization's needs, the family's needs and find that sweet spot in the middle where we're really able to be supportive, but also make sure our critical business is being accomplished? So if I may, I have a couple ideas on what employees should do in terms of evaluating things for their life and going forward in conversation--

[00:16:35.17] ANTHONY SIS: Oh, yeah.

[00:16:35.47] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: --with their managers.

[00:16:36.02] ANTHONY SIS: Please.

[00:16:36.30] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: OK, awesome.

[00:16:37.09] TORAL PATEL: Definitely share them.

[00:16:37.96] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Awesome. So one of the things that's hard for families is that there's so much uncertainty right now. Right? But I think a good place to start is to map out a couple different scenarios if public school starts in person by X date or if my child care center has to close.

[00:16:55.99] And then really think about the ways that your family or your personal life network will really be able to help you through those scenarios. And then from there, you're evaluating what your work schedule needs are and really considering, OK, based on the bandwidth that you have available and taking into consideration the seven days a week, not just the five days, not just the Monday through Friday.

[00:17:18.85] Sometimes we get so blinded to what the workday needs to be or the work week needs to be, that we don't leverage all of the time that we have that might be available. And then think about practically what can get accomplished. Someone should look at the workload that they have and the personal bandwidth that they have and try to match up, hey, when can I work when I'm at my best? And then take those scenarios, come up with a couple of strategies to address them.

[00:17:46.09] And when you approach your supervisor with those scenarios, it's important to come with suggestions and solutions. Right? So it may be that one particular item of your work really isn't as high level right now. Or there's other more

efficient ways to accomplish it. Or there's somebody else on the team that has expressed an interest in taking on or getting to know pieces of that work.

[00:18:11.17] So there's a variety of strategies. The working parent needs to go into that conversation understanding that it's a matter of flexibility going both ways as much as possible. Right? While some of the things that you propose may be great for you personally, they're going to have workplace implications.

[00:18:27.52] And you need to talk about where you can meet in the middle. Managers tend to fall in the trap of wanting to help caregivers, taking work off the plate of caregivers and sometimes giving that to others who often don't have care-giving responsibilities without necessarily thinking through all of the implications of that.

[00:18:49.76] So it's really important as managers that we're thinking about the well-being of the entire team. The purpose of this podcast is to talk about family life issues. But the reality is, as you just so eloquently opened with, Anthony, about your own mental well-being throughout this pandemic, people are navigating lots of different issues right now.

[00:19:08.86] And to create that culture of belonging and well-being that we are so invested in, I think it's helpful for a manager to communicate that as a priority to the entire team, regardless of whether they have a child or not and to talk about, what are our needs as a team? And how are we going to support each other through that? Recognizing, yes, the caregivers have some unique burdens and challenges right now.

[00:19:32.11] But there may be other issues that folks are coping with that are not so obvious to us. And we don't want to make assumptions that, oh, they're fine, just because they don't have young kids that they're raising right now and then to really talk about, as a team, hey, what are our opportunities here in this?

[00:19:48.40] Granted, we have a long list of high-priority items, but to map out, are there more efficient ways? Or does somebody on the team-- and it could even be a caregiver-- have interest in picking up work in a different area or learning a different area?

[00:20:04.06] Sometimes these are really bumpy conversations. And we have to get comfortable with having bumpy, challenging conversations with our teams. But I find caregivers and non-caregivers are much more engaged and willing to support each other when it's clear that the well-being of the entire team matters. That is really important.

[00:20:24.83] Lastly, I think, for managers, we need to all recognize that managers are human beings, too. And they have their own family life matters, right? So sometimes we segment these things. And there's no real segmentation here. We have managers who have children, elders, health issues, all of those things. And yet, they're experiencing the pressure from employees that report to them and pressure from the folks that they

report to. Navigating all of that on top of their own personal life considerations is a lot on managers.

[00:21:00.89] And so it should really be a team experience. And I want everyone to think about, as a team, if we look forward a year, what space do we want to be in together as a team? Do we want to reflect back on this time and say, wow, I can't believe we got through that? But we did it together.

[00:21:18.89] And while that may seem Pollyanna and naive, I do want to reflect back on this time and have those types of feelings. I think many of us will. But sometimes we get so wrapped up into the stuff that we're doing each and every day, that we don't take a moment to pause about the long-term impact of our relationships and how we're getting through this together.

[00:21:38.54] ANTHONY SIS: That is gold. That is such gold, like the importance of well-being of your entire team, relationships, maintaining those relationships, even through these challenges with a pandemic and the social injustices that are occurring. So that's such gold right there.

[00:21:53.30] TORAL PATEL: I agree. It's great advice for both the employees and managers. Michelle, I did want to focus a little bit on something you said earlier in terms of some employees are reluctant to have these open conversations with their managers and supervisors. Do you think that diverse staff and faculty are more reluctant to have these conversations? And why do you think that could be?

[00:22:15.98] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: I'm hesitant to make a sweeping generalization. I'm always careful about that. I think that it goes back to the relationship that the employee of color has with their leader already, the manager already. All right? I think that if they have a history of open dialogue of being able to be authentic, no, I don't think that they're experiencing the same level of challenges.

[00:22:39.89] I don't think they're experiencing an added layer of challenge in terms of talking about family life matters, necessarily. I think if there are tensions, if an employee of color feels like they can't bring their authentic selves to work and show up in their race, in their ethnicity, then I would seriously question how we would expect them to feel more comfortable bringing their family life dynamic into play in the workplace. And for some people, they actually share. It's easier to talk about family life issues than it is some of these other matters.

[00:23:11.90] But my personal observation is really those that are struggling in their relationship with their supervisor, and talking about race, and talking about inclusion in their team or their supervisors' receptivity to conversation about situations that were uncomfortable or the employee needed help with. That can be really tough to then talk about family life accommodations, or scheduling changes, and things like that. Because you don't have the foundation as much of trust.

[00:23:43.05] And I think anytime we're talking about anything personal as a part of our identity, trust is such an important part of that. And that goes for family life of all kinds. That goes for disabilities, dealing with mental health issues. We have a fair number of employees who have reported challenges with depression and anxiety throughout this time.

[00:24:04.34] And I'm not necessarily suggesting that the employee needs to always talk about that with their manager. But if they are looking to have a conversation about how that's impacting their performance and what kind of support they might need or resources that they might need, I don't anticipate those conversations to occur or to occur successfully if that foundation of trust is missing. So to me-- and I know we've talked about this, Toral and Anthony, is belonging and well-being are not these mutually exclusive concepts. Right?

[00:24:35.00] And they each inform each other. They're interwoven. And I think it does come back to that space of really honoring the other individual and really giving them space to be themselves and to be welcome in our community, however they define themselves or whatever community that they connect with. So that's probably not a very eloquent answer to a very complex question, but I say it depends.

[00:25:04.39] [LAUGHTER]

[00:25:07.97] ANTHONY SIS: For me, I go by the adage that sometimes complex questions require complex solutions, and that there's often not a one size fits all for complex questions and environments like the ones that we're navigating right now. Right?

[00:25:21.44] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Yeah.

[00:25:21.86] ANTHONY SIS: For me, I love everything that you shared so far. And I love the incorporation of even people who aren't or don't have families or aren't caregivers at the moment like myself. And so for me, a lot of what I've been thinking about, working with team members like Toral and other team members that do have families, what are some of the suggestions or things that you would recommend for people who do work in teams with families right now to support them or show up for them, really engage in what allyship looks like for working families?

[00:25:53.00] TORAL PATEL: And I probably want to expand that question a little bit to say it goes both ways, right? So how can individuals that do have families also support the well-being of our colleagues who are by themselves in this area as well?

[00:26:05.38] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: I think, first and foremost, it's important to start from a place of generosity of thought, and to have grace, and to offer each other grace and authentic listening. What I've heard from some parents are, don't tell me that I'm a great parent and all is going to be fine. Don't gloss over it, right? This is really hard. There's implications for the things that we choose. The health decisions that I'm having to make

are serious. And the best thing that you can do is just listen when I'm having a tough moment.

[00:26:35.54] And so while sometimes really well-intended encouragement feels good to some folks, for others it can actually seem a bit, for lack of better word, clueless to the realities of what a family is coping with. So I think that is probably one of the most important pieces is just allowing for space, for experience.

[00:26:58.87] For caregivers, for parents, especially, are so wrapped up in a lot of the family life considerations and trying to get the basics of work done, that maybe sometimes we forget how important it is to check in with all of our colleagues. Right? When you get so immersed in so much stress and so many challenges, it can be easy sometimes to overlook some of those foundational things that are really important as a team.

[00:27:24.55] So wherever we can provide opportunity for meaningful connection, right? So what I have found throughout the pandemic is there's a lot of opportunities for connection. And people force connection in some ways, but that does not mean that it is always meaningful or productive. We should not meet just to meet, right?

[00:27:46.57] ANTHONY SIS: Oh, yes.

[00:27:47.68] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: I feel really strongly about that, right?

[00:27:51.28] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah.

[00:27:51.60] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: So I think that looking for those opportunities for meaningful connections in that way and saying to each other, how can I help you? Just asking and maybe even, dare I say, offer a couple proactive ways that you're offering to help someone.

[00:28:07.97] I saw this really great thing the other day. An employee had a colleague that worked in a different state, in fact, that sent their child an activity kit that was made from local stuff that that person had gathered in that state, just saying, I know this has been a really hard time for you. I thought I would uplift your child's spirits a little bit. And that just felt really good on both ends.

[00:28:31.36] I also think there's some neat collaboration opportunities, so some of our folks who don't have children or care-giving responsibilities, but have an interest, or a hobby, or something that they might want to teach a middle school-aged child. There may be ways that we can foster relationships in that space.

[00:28:49.75] But I think it's important that it's organic and that it's genuine. I think we can provide infrastructure for some of those things. But the most powerful stuff comes from truly organic, creative thinking among colleagues just wanting to encourage and support each other.

[00:29:07.57] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I agree wholeheartedly. As an individual who has an amazing team, it has been very helpful when I have just needed to vent about things that I was experiencing and what I was going through. And my team was there to listen. Like you said, Michelle, I don't necessarily need them to give me solutions. I just need to talk to somebody and let people know how I'm feeling outside of those that I'm actually experiencing that with. Right?

[00:29:31.78] So my family is here, but they're part of the dynamic of what I'm going through. And so I need to tell others about what I'm feeling. And just having my team there to listen to me during our check-in meetings has been really a lifesaver. Because as you know, and as our listeners know, I've gone through a lot with my mom being sick earlier this year and all of that. And so thank you for sharing that.

[00:29:51.97] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: One thing that we haven't talked about yet, but I think is something that a lot of employees and the families in particular are grappling with is grief and loss. So you may have seen in some of the national articles around our nation is grieving and mourning.

[00:30:06.52] And what is meant by that is a more broad definition of what grief and loss really means. This isn't just related to the death of someone who has COVID, which is so significant and traumatic in itself. But then we have the grief and loss of safety, of the feeling of feeling safe in your community, depending on what your personal identities are, what your experiences are with those things.

[00:30:33.92] And when you take away the foundation of feeling safe, that makes it very difficult to perform. That makes it very difficult to really show up in the work space in the way that we know we want our employees to show up in. And there's an emotional burden that comes with that, that to me is a big part of grief and loss.

[00:30:55.46] And then you take on some of these other elements for parents who are grieving the norms of parenthood that are not present right now. So we just had a couple thousand parents dropping their children off at college who did not have the drop-off process they normally would have.

[00:31:15.01] And let's keep in mind, we're talking about family life from child care, and public schools, and stuff. But we have many Cornell employees with college-age children who are helping their children transition to the college environment during a time of a lot of uncertainty. There's no making your child's college dorm bed. There's none of those typical things that we do and look forward to. Many did not have traditional graduation ceremonies.

[00:31:41.26] So I think that that's something parents are coping with. But they also see their children coping with it and are struggling to figure out, OK, how am I going to help my child through the grief and loss pieces here? And then lastly, in terms of grief and loss, death continues to happen in ways outside of COVID. There's vehicle accidents. There's heart attacks. There's aging, and ailments, and all of these things.

[00:32:05.30] And yet, even though that death is not the result of COVID, it is very much so impacted by the pandemic in the sense that we cannot have our traditional morning activities and gatherings. We may not be able to travel to see our loved one before they pass away.

[00:32:22.03] And in the context of parenting, a lot of grandchildren are not being able to interact with their grandparents right now, even healthy grandparents, because of health and safety restrictions or concerns of the family. Maybe not even restrictions, but just concerns.

[00:32:38.69] And so there's a loss there in terms of who your family is, and how you're spending time with them, and how you're interacting that while, frankly, thank goodness for digital opportunities to build connection, I guess I'm one of the old-school folks that say there's a limit to the effectiveness of that. I have heard from many that just say, I wish I could hug a friend. I need a hug right now. Right?

[00:33:00.55] And I think we just need to let that be in that space and not try to fix that with yet another technical solution. Right? We need to figure out how to work with that. So at any rate, I just think it's important to recognize that grief and loss is something that our community, all employees may be experiencing in a variety of ways, whether that's related to diversity, or family life, or death.

[00:33:22.78] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for sharing that. It made me think a lot about my own current moment as well, in addition to what I shared earlier, in that a large part of my reservation to visit my family back in Chicago has been around not so much my health, but if I'm asymptomatic, say, with COVID, how then that might affect my parents or my grandparents who are older.

[00:33:44.74] And I would love to see them. And even in talking to them, they say, oh, I wish I could see you. And COVID has definitely made me think a lot about my interactions with them, not so much for my own safety, but for theirs and limiting that interaction as much as possible.

[00:33:57.34] And I haven't really thought about it in the context of mourning and grieving until you mentioned it now. So I just want to acknowledge that. And thank you for introducing that as an important consideration when we're thinking about well-being in the workplace. Because that's something I hadn't really thought about, but that does affect my productivity.

[00:34:12.82] And I've shared it with the team that I work with, how I do want to go visit, or I do have these limitations, or I do have family members currently that are sick and dying. And they're not really seeing anybody, even though they're sick and dying because of COVID. And that's sad. I mean, that has brought me a lot of sadness as well to just think about, am I going to see this person again, physically, before they pass? I would like to. And I hope I do.

[00:34:34.63] But I also understand why they're limiting their interactions with family members at the moment. And so that's a very scary thought, even just saying it out loud now, that I may not see this person that is currently dying at the moment. And that is a very tough reality to face, even as somebody who doesn't have a family here in Ithaca. But it still affects me in many ways. So, yeah.

[00:34:55.36] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: I hear you. Well, I'm very sorry to hear that you have some ill family members that are in your family, Anthony. And there's going to be no sugarcoating for me, but I hear your experience. And I wish them well. And I hope you do get that opportunity.

[00:35:10.46] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you.

[00:35:11.41] TORAL PATEL: Michelle, is there anything that we can do individually? So myself, right? Anthony and I are part of a team. Is there anything that individual staff members can do to help alleviate some of this grief and loss that our colleagues might be feeling?

[00:35:28.69] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Alleviate is an interesting word.

[00:35:30.64] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. And I was trying to think of the right word. Alleviate is not the right word, but even acknowledging. How do I go about acknowledging, maybe, what Anthony is experiencing as a team member?

[00:35:41.44] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: But part of it, I think, in that moment is not shutting down the story that Anthony just told. Right? So Anthony is telling a story. If we were immediately to jump to the next topic in our agenda, to me that does not provide space for the authentic sharing that Anthony just gave.

[00:36:00.27] One of the best ways that you can offer support is following up with an individual. So while we just heard that story, as time goes on, if Anthony hears from you, Toral, I'm thinking about your family, I'm thinking about you today. How are they doing? Or just really expressing care and concern, that sends a signal that Anthony's story is still in your heart and in your mind.

[00:36:25.66] And so I know that sounds very simplistic. But to me, it's those types of ongoing connections that make it clear that it was OK that Anthony shared that story. Right? If you don't acknowledge that again, if you don't bring that up again and you just wait for Anthony to give you an update on it, that puts the onus on Anthony to have to continue with that story.

[00:36:51.30] Whereas, I believe the environments that we really want to create are more proactive in that way of, like, I know that you're hurting. Or I know that this is weighing on you. What can I do to support you? Or can I just listen? Right? And there are more tangible things in terms of supporting each other's efforts to take time off. There's sometimes even financial support, that I've seen teams rally together and

support an individual. That might have certain increased expenses related to care-giving right now.

[00:37:25.14] But I find that the most powerful and the most impactful is just our relationships. If you have other ideas, I would love to hear them, too. I tend to be the one being asked to throw out ideas. But I find I really learn from personal stories that other people have shared and how they've went about getting support.

[00:37:40.89] ANTHONY SIS: I'll say, Toral, when you were in Dallas, that was almost always one of the first things we would check in with you about, to say, what is it that you need from us? Is there anything you need from us? And in general, how is your family doing? How are you doing?

[00:37:53.13] And I think even through this podcast, we were very intentional, working with Bert to make sure that even in the experience of the podcast, incorporated that aspect of well-being to check in with Toral, to allow Toral to submit audio recordings, even at times that may have not been the most convenient for us working on this podcast. Right? And so just being intentional. I think intentionality matters. And that looks different for each person and each team, but being intentional and being authentic and caring about it.

[00:38:20.94] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: And it being consistent, if I may.

[00:38:22.38] ANTHONY SIS: And consistent. Yes. Yeah.

[00:38:23.79] TORAL PATEL: I was going to say the exact same thing, Michelle.

[00:38:26.82] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Well, I mean, I'm just thinking of the scenarios that I've seen play out where we're trying to be super supportive of an individual. But then we're flooding their inbox with emails on a day when they're dealing with a care-giving related issue, instead of being a little bit more connecting to-- really thinking about, OK, what's their experience going to be like if they are having to check their email today? Or they check their email the next day and it's flooded.

[00:38:52.53] Is there anything that we can do to mitigate that a little bit and offer more support? Can one person be responsible for updating that person later, once they have the bandwidth? Right? And that consistency of the message of, we care about you and we're thinking about you from various angles, not just in a easier to say, I'm thinking of you, we're thinking of you, let us know if there's anything you can do, which are all great things.

[00:39:17.37] But then to not have it backed by meaningful work actions and the importance of follow-up, that sends a very different message that removes the authenticity. And I think that goes back to some of the things that we see in the D&I space, too? Right? Yes, this is a priority. Yes, this is something we're really focused on.

We care about your experience, but only in this one isolated way, instead of really looking at that and the entire experience at Cornell. Right?

[00:39:47.73] TORAL PATEL: So, Michelle, I know we've covered just a variety of topics. Is there anything, maybe a specific topic that you feel like we haven't touched on, that still has been impacting families greatly and in recent times?

[00:39:59.19] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Thank you for asking that. Yes, I think that there is. So one of the topics that we're really seeing, issues, that we're seeing come up for families is related to domestic violence. And this has played out globally in other countries. But it's also played out nationally in New York state and then more specifically in Tompkins County where there's been a 50% increase to calls to local advocacy center hot lines in order for individuals to access support resources.

[00:40:28.59] There's a variety of reasons we think that this might be occurring. But my main point is it is happening, and it is not limited to specific socioeconomic statuses, genders, races. Domestic violence can happen to any individual. It does not discriminate. And it happens in higher education. And so I think it's important to acknowledge that this is occurring and to make sure that individuals are aware support is available, should they need any.

[00:40:56.94] TORAL PATEL: Thank you. That is an important message I think everyone should hear, that we do have support available at Cornell for anyone that needs that. Thank you.

[00:41:04.32] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah, just to emphasize that piece around support, Michelle, are there-- so I know in our show notes for this episode, we are going to include a link with a more comprehensive list of resources. But are there any that you want to highlight, particularly on this episode and especially with the topic of domestic violence that we may want to highlight for our listeners?

[00:41:21.69] And as we wrap up this conversation that has been so great and so informative in many ways from my perspective, even as somebody who doesn't have a family, I want to just acknowledge and thank you both for allowing this space to also incorporate my own voice in a very personal way. I just want to acknowledge that as well. But what other gems, if any, to remind folks about the importance of well-being, particularly for our parents, caregivers, families at the moment?

[00:41:47.82] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Well, I'm very proud to work at Cornell. Because we have invested so heavily in support resources for employees, for faculty and staff related to family life and well-being. I won't be able to go through all of them. So I'm glad you're going to link to those resources.

[00:42:01.59] But the university is offering a Child Care Grant Program that has made some adjustments to support COVID-related needs. We have a university work/life consultant that meets with individuals on parenting and child care related matters as

well as elder care. The Cornell Child Care Center offers services. There's a lengthy list, so I won't bore you with all of those details. But there is a variety of support that's available.

[00:42:27.25] I think that the gem that I would offer is directly to the families, directly to those of you that are parents and just to simply say it's OK to revisit the expectations that you have of yourself and others right now, whether it's expectations of your children, your spouses, partners, or yourself.

[00:42:44.85] This is a lot that we are coping with. We hear you. And we see your challenges. Your experience matters. If you're struggling, please get help. Help is available. And try to remember that what's most important right now is to preserve the relationship that you have with your child. The rest will get figured out. The educational components will get figured out.

[00:43:06.30] But the mental health of yourself and your child matter. And preserving that positive relationship that has space for humor and laughter and grace and togetherness-- all of those things-- really, it's OK to prioritize that. And not only is it OK, but I think it should be our priority right now, during a time with so many challenges.

[00:43:29.68] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you so much, again, for joining us on the show, Michelle. Thank you.

[00:43:32.88] TORAL PATEL: Thank you.

[00:43:33.87] MICHELLE ARTIBEE: Thank you. It was a pleasure to be with you.

[00:43:42.15] TORAL PATEL: Wow, what a great conversation we just had with Michelle. Where do we even begin to do our recap here? We talked about so many different things. What are your initial thoughts?

[00:43:52.65] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah, my initial thoughts are that so much has changed since we did this interview. So just for some context to our listeners, we recorded this interview about two months ago. And as I shared in the episode, I had a family member or I have a family member, still, who is dying of a particular condition. And since then, another one of my family members, a really close one, has also been diagnosed with that same condition.

[00:44:18.64] So even though their experiences are different, just knowing that two people in my family are suffering from the same condition-- it's been a really big challenge to just sit with. And so I think, particularly, as I think about this topic with working families and how people are navigating, working through a global pandemic, connecting with family and loved ones, it really brought me back. And I was like, wow, I didn't realize what I was going through then.

[00:44:45.06] And taking into consideration what I'm going through now, I just feel like that information is so fresh, the information that Michelle shared here and especially the resources. I think they're just so valuable to the Cornell community and especially to staff. And I just hope that staff continue to engage in these resources. I also just really appreciated the insight, especially with Michelle and the work that she does in her office with staff members across the university.

[00:45:12.99] So it just gave a really unique bird's-eye view of what people are going through as a result of a global pandemic as well as all of the social injustice that is continuing to happen even to this day. So, yeah, we did this two months ago, but it just still feels fresh as if we had just recorded this episode yesterday.

[00:45:32.22] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I agree. And I think one of the things that stood out to me was actually keeping you in mind when I was thinking about it, was knowing what you're going through is this team dynamic philosophy that we talked about quite a bit with Michelle in terms of the importance of well-being for the entire team. Right? I know that our focus was individuals with family.

[00:45:51.84] And I think when we have those words, we initially think of our co-workers who have kids, but realizing that there are so many different components of what our team members might be experiencing right now. And how we can be there for each other, I think, was an important part for me. And really, I had you in mind when I was thinking about that and just knowing what you have gone through and how your life has changed in the last two months, since we actually had this conversation with Michelle.

[00:46:18.18] ANTHONY SIS: It's changed a lot. And just from a reflection standpoint, it's really made me think about, OK, if this is what I'm going through, then what are other staff members going through within the university? Right? When I think about families, caregivers, just everyone.

[00:46:34.20] And so I just really think about this concept of well-being, especially as it applies to our team, how we're caring for each other, how people are doing as well as with our colleagues that we work with across different units and different departments. And so that's something that has really stood out for me as well, is just really centering people's well-being throughout this entire time.

[00:46:54.70] And so I just wanted to share something, too, in regards to well-being that I don't think Michelle would mind me sharing. But one of the things that I really appreciated when we recorded this episode-- a few weeks later, Michelle reached out to me and asked me. She asked me how I was doing and how my family member was doing at the time. And so I just really appreciated that, yes, this is part of the work that Michelle does.

[00:47:20.67] But I just feel like, also, the tone in that email was very genuine, and it was very authentic. And I think just receiving that email and not even responding to it, just receiving it, for me, really increased my sense of belonging here at Cornell as a

staff member and just knowing that she really does practice what she preaches, that she's not just saying to do this outreach and to engage in these organic ways to check in with people. She also does the same for others as well and for other colleagues.

[00:47:51.72] And so I definitely just want to give a special recognition once again, to Michelle, for reaching out to me, just to see how I was doing and just to check in with me in regards with my family member. So just once again, really appreciate it and really appreciate all of the hard work that you and your team are doing at this moment, Michelle. So thank you.

[00:48:11.76] TORAL PATEL: One thing that Michelle said was that belonging and well-being are not mutually exclusive and that they really are tied together. And so, really, when we talk about us as individuals, that we aren't bringing just one aspect of ourselves into work on any given day. Right?

[00:48:27.66] So right now, today it's not just about my physical well-being or my family's well-being in terms of health that I'm concerned about. Right? It could also be other aspects of our society that are impacting my family. Right? And so it's really thinking about all of these things that impact us as individuals, not necessarily as mutually exclusive, but all tied together. And all of those things tied together make us who we are, and what we bring, and how we bring ourselves to work.

[00:48:57.01] We hope you enjoyed today's show. If you like what you heard, be sure to subscribe and submit a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or SoundCloud. It helps new listeners find the show. Also, if you or a fellow colleague would like to be interviewed for an upcoming episode, please email us at ie-academy@cornell.edu. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:49:18.46] ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:49:24.40] TORAL PATEL: This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Workforce Diversity in collaboration with Cornell Broadcast Studio.

[00:49:37.14] ANTHONY SIS: We would like to give a special shout-out and thank you to our co-producer and sound engineer, Bert Odom-Reed, for making us sound wonderful each and every episode.

[00:49:47.29] SPEAKER: Thanks, Bert.